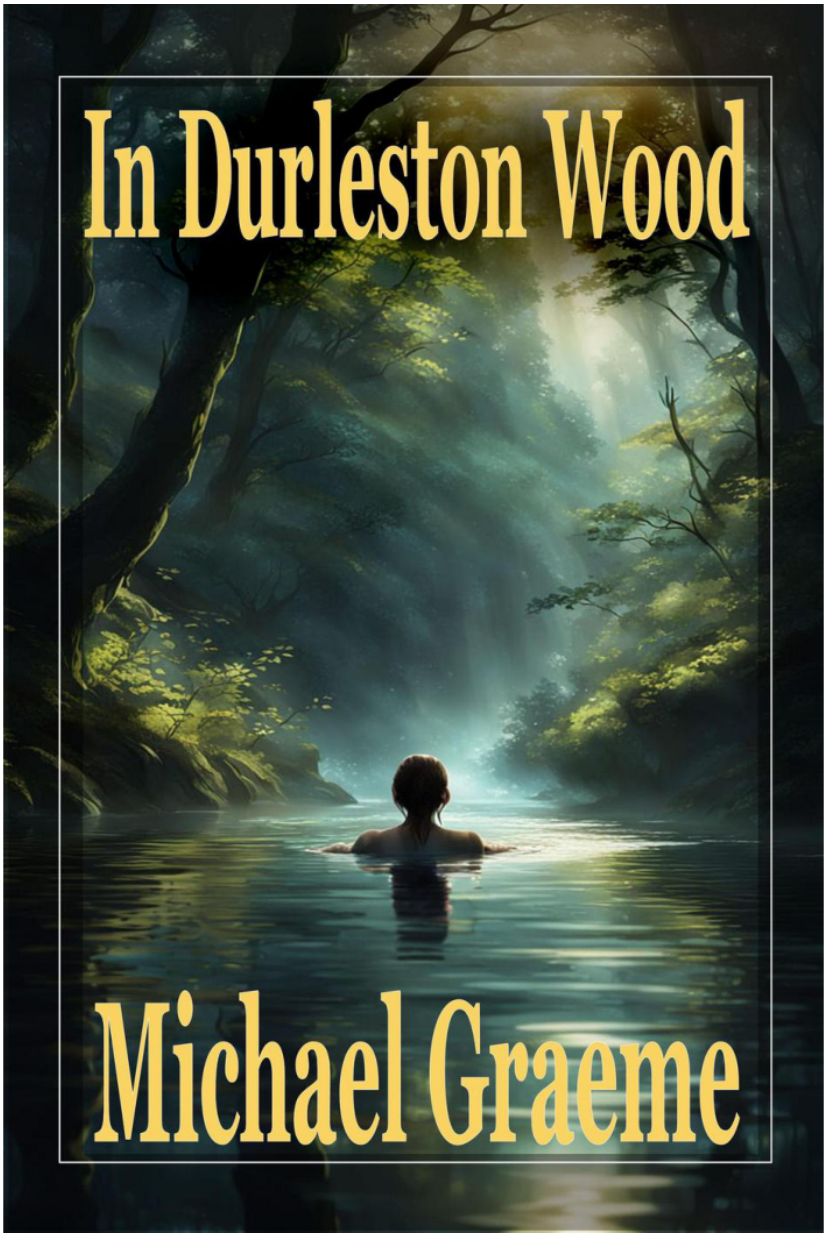
In Durleston Wood
Michael Graeme

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by
Michael Graeme

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Dedication:

To the memory of Durleston Wood,
to the ghosts who once dwelled there,
and who kept me company over the years.
May they now find their peace elsewhere.

* * * * *

Chapter 1

The gun lies against the roots of the beech tree, as it once lay in my boyhood, the oiled walnut of the stock blending like dry grass into the background. The old blued barrel and the telescope seem to blur out of existence as they are dissolved by the soft light. I've been sitting here since dawn, and I have neither seen nor heard another human being. The canopy is filled with the song of invisible birds. Invisible too are the creatures I seek. It is as if they smell the gun, feel it as a disturbance in the harmony of things.

There is a rabbit-run across the river, no more than a smudge through the undergrowth, but in regular use. I estimate it's twenty five yards away. From my elevated position, I have command of it, even with an old air rifle. But today the wildlife of Durleston Wood remains under cover. It's mid-morning now and the time for hunting has gone, but still I wait - wait for this ancient place to accept me back, to close over me, for the troublesome ripples of my past and my presence to fade and for the surface of things to become once more clear and calm,.. for the future to reveal itself.

I wait a long time.

Not moving.

From my vantage point, leaning back against the tree, I can see the Rye running sluggishly below. The canopy stirs sleepily, wearing the deep green of high summer in all its torpid density, while the air of the woodland floor is thick, stunned into stillness by the heat, and the weight, and the humidity.

I might have been forty five that morning, or any age from about eight years old, from the time when I first came this way with my father. My childhood memories of sitting in that same spot, among the roots of the beech tree, are a perfect remembrance of the sights and sounds and scents of everything about me now, so I am able to glimpse more easily perhaps the meaninglessness of time.

I am a child, a teenager, I am middle aged and old. I am a moment spanning the fresh quickness of youth, all the way through the blur of my life to the frailty and decrepitude of one making terms with his own death. All of it is the same - just as this tree has already fallen, while at the same time it is no more than a fresh sapling raised in ancient days upon the banks of the River Rye.

There comes an unnatural sway to the grasses now, a shadow

slipping through the undergrowth, and finally a grey, lumpen form materialises. It hops cautiously, stopping now to lift itself on hind legs, and to sniff the air. The gun comes easily to my shoulder, the thread-worn cotton of the waxed Thornproof jacket making not a whisper. The cheek-plate is cool, while the scent of decades old polish and gun oil releases memories of other times such as this, other long waits for sight and sound of the simple lives that ebb and flow beneath the trees in Durleston wood.

It's a rabbit - young, lame, made careless by hunger and by the torment of its injury. Nature will take it back into her blooded bosom soon: a fox, a domestic dog, even a cat, or a man with a gun. I fix the cross hairs upon its skull. The rifle is a Webley, a powerful weapon in its day, with the unusual facility of interchangeable barrels. I have on the .177 calibre this morning, but really you need the .22 for killing. The .177 is for target shooting, a lighter pellet and more likely to maim all but the smallest living thing, unless you can manage a head-shot, square between the eyes or tucked in behind the ear. All of these things I remember, even though for the past thirty years of my life they have been of no use to me whatsoever.

What else do I remember? Better not to dwell,... just go with the flow of things.

The rabbit settles to nibble the grass. It's in the open now, ears pricked for the slightest disturbance in the subtle flow of the wood. I breathe slowly, adjusting my aim so the sights settle reliably and repeatedly upon the mark when I breathe out. I exhale one last time, then pause, as my father taught me. The sights close on the rabbit and I squeeze into the feather-lightness of the trigger.

A good shot.

Clean.

I take a breath and lay the gun across my lap, settling back once more against the tree, deeper into meditation now. The canopy sways and swishes in a different air and I feel myself tingling as a vital part of me slips free, slips through the cracks in time. The rabbit hops away. There was no sound from the gun, no tension in the spring, nor even a pellet in the breech.

A fox will take the rabbit. Let it be that way. There was a time when such a kill would have graced the kitchen table, but those days are a long time gone. I've killed nothing since my boyhood, and only then because it was the way my father taught me. I am not

about to start all that again now.

It's something else I need to reconnect with here, in Durleston Wood, something other than merely spilling the blood of its creatures. It's more a way of thinking, a way of feeling, an instinct for life, for a way of living, a way of seeing.

If only I could remember it!

The morning draws on and the sky becomes a deeper grey, while the air moving down the valley grows cooler and not so humid. A change is coming! The sycamore leaves in the deep of the wood begin to show their backs, their paler foliage lending a contrast to the shadow, and I smell centuries of life rising, centuries of decay and renewal.

There will be rain.

I move away, side stepping with a quietness that still comes easily, down the bank to a narrow ledge by the river, along which there runs a sketchy path. I trace it downstream, nosing through low branches to a hidden bend, half remembered, and a broad shelf where there lies a ring of river washed stones and the remains of a recent fire. I'm surprised to see it. I built this ring as a boy, here on this dry bank, nothing combustible close by, nothing to risk a fire getting out of hand.

I've thought of this place, now and then, over the years. In the mean time, some other soul has chanced upon the spot and adopted it: a sympathetic soul too, for there is no litter - nor orange peel, nor chocolate wrappers to disturb the harmony of the wood - just the scent of those centuries, and the ever present rippling of the peaty Rye.

I gather dry grasses and twigs, then set them in the ashes contained by the ring, and I light them with a match. I add more fuel to the flames and while the fire grows, I take out a screwdriver and begin to dismantle the gun. The stock comes off easily and I lay it across the fire. It steams for a while, as if in disbelief, then darkens suddenly and begins to burn. Before removing the barrel, I cock the spring, so as to make sure that time will ruin it. Then I take off the telescope and unscrew the focussing lens to expose the delicate graticule and its adjustment.

The river runs slower here, bulging out to hundred feet or more and slowing to a ponderous glide as it takes the bend, so that towards the far bank there is an almost stagnant pool bottomed by deep silt. I toss the telescope into the middle of it, then the

mechanism of the spring and cylinder. The barrel I lay between two rocks and strike it with a hefty stone, bending it. Then it follows the rest of the gun into the silty pool,... and is gone.

It's a pity. I remember the gun as an accurate weapon. But more than that, the gun represents for me now the lore of the wood. It belongs to a time beyond the ken of today's children. But the days of guns in Durleston Wood are over, and it's better it should meet its end here than be sold on, perhaps to fall into the hands of a misanthropic teenager, to become corrupted as a breaker of windows and a killer of cats. Guns mean something else entirely these days.

It's partly this sentiment that has brought me back to the wood, but there is something else, something in the ritual I do not immediately understand. It is a sacrifice of course, an offering. It is a letting go, the sending of a ripple back into the past, so that the past might offer something back to me.

Then, glancing up from the flames, I realise I am being watched! It's a woman, dark skinned, gaunt, crouching perfectly still among the balsam on the opposite bank. I find this shocking, for I had thought myself alone. Suddenly though I'm looking across the silty waters of the Rye into a pair of dark eyes, watching me. How long has she been there? What must she be thinking of my strange ritual?

I call to her: "Hello?"

But she takes fright at once and is gone, snatched back like a startled animal, into the shadow of the wood. And for a moment, above the thickly lapping sound of the river, there comes the sound of a chain being dragged.

Chapter 2

They say that once you've left the place where you were born you should never go back - that to go back is somehow to have failed. Our footsteps should wend for ever spiralling outwards, they say, that to return home is against the way of things, that to return home is to have been nowhere at all. But sometimes we are bound to return and for no more reason than our path leads us there, that after decades of spiralling out, it cuts right back to the centre.

The reasons are many and mysterious, but to remain at large in the world at such a time would be to ignore the vital tide of life, it would be to ignore the fact that somewhere in our past there might lie something we have overlooked, that a return to our childhood, or more: to a sense of what grounds us in reality, is the best we can do, when all else seems to have fallen away.

I left this place twenty years ago, left the old pit village of Marsden, in the grey English North, exchanged it for the sunshine of California, tanned my skin, and brought up children on the beaches of the Pacific coast. I built a life with a blonde haired, long-legged woman who, after all of our time together, decided we should call it a day, and apparently for no other reason, she said, than that I bored her. So, I have come home now. To my father.

He's not looking bad today. He sits upright in a tweed jacket. It's threadbare now, but the care-workers know he is fond of it. And they have tied his tie nicely. There is a chessboard between us, though it's months now since he's had the energy to apply himself to a game, but the carers have explained to me there is something in the way the pieces are arranged that pleases him - that even though he rarely speaks now, and his tempers can make him difficult to manage, the simple array of a chess game calms him. It's as if he remembers a fragment of his former self in it, as I remember a fragment of my former self in Durleston.

The pieces are not lined up in their beginning positions; there is always a game in play. One of the carers has set this up by copying positions from a little book of classic games she found in a charity shop. Any attempt to randomly array the pieces, something that might for example result in the illogicality of two white bishops - is enough to set my father grumbling. Even in his old age, and his confusion, he cannot be placated by pretence.

He is still lucid at times, and sensible, but even on those treasured occasions we do not talk of certain things. I think he knows his home has gone. I sold it to pay for his care, but we do not mention this. It still exists in his mind, and also in my dreams, as a place he will return to, just as soon as he starts to feel a little brighter in himself. It was the place he brought his wife home to fifty years ago, the place he raised his child in, the place he would have liked to leave his child when he finally shuffles off, but like I said: we do not mention it.

He's quite chatty today, remembering a walk by the Rye, when I was twelve. My memory of this event is clear enough to know it is not an illusion on his part, but he is remembering it in such detail I wonder if the past can possibly be embellished in this way; his memories have such a brightness to them, while mine are dull, tarnished by the abrasive dross of all that has filled my life since. But I like his picture of things, so borrow from a mind that may be manufacturing fantasy-frilled edges, and I accept it all unflinchingly as the truth, for no other reason than it has a brightness about it, when everything else in the world these days strikes me as unbearably dull.

He's speaking of the path around the horseshoe of the Rye, and the season when the ramsons and the bluebells and the wood-anemones bloom together to create an impossibly beautiful carpet beneath the overarching boughs of beech and oak and sycamore.

We have the gun, and we are ratting along the banks of the Rye, close by the Willet place, the curious, lonely old house in Durleston Wood. I am away from school - some mysterious illness of the spirit that has laid me low, and which is somehow soothed now by the warm blanket gloom of Durleston, and the peaty smell of the Rye.

The rats are not rats but water voles, the Ratty-Rats of Tales of Toad and Badger, and homely Mole - harmless voles twisted by ignorance into carriers of plague and shot almost to extinction. And when he talks about the starry heads of the ramsons, I am with him, their garlic scent overwhelming me in hot waves as we lie prone for hours, the gun lined up on a likely looking hole in the sandy bank of the Rye.

Bumble bees buzz, ducking in and out of the shade of our hats, but we bide them patiently, and when my father mentions this, I am amazed that he can have recalled the scene so vividly, and I am drawn into it - not just the pictures and the scent, but the "feel" of it

- to have my belly against the soft earth, and to have it soothe my fear, soothe the feeling of that twelve year old boy that he is entering a life he surely was not meant for.

Did I tell you my wife's name is Faye? It's three years since I last saw her, now, but we died a long time before that. I know this because I tell myself I think of her so little, and that when I do there is neither hate nor fondness in it. She is not like the first girl I fell in love with, whom I think of still with a wistful tenderness, the girl whose love my father's story of that walk reminds me I had already betrayed as I lay there that day with the gun. Her name was Lillian.

Lillian and I are kneeling in the school hall, at Marsden C. of E. Primary School. I am eleven, she is on the cusp of her tenth birthday, and there is something about her face, something about her eyes, and in the way the light falls upon her long blonde hair that pleases me, though in a way I do not understand. And while I am looking at her, taking pleasure in this thing I do not understand, I become aware that she has looked up, is looking at me, and on seeing or sensing my pleasure, she is smiling at me, smiling because my pleasure gives her pleasure. And the more pleasure we are each aware of inspiring in the other, the greater becomes our pleasure, so the feeling is like a flowering, like a swelling of spiritual bliss. And we blossom into the unexpected enlightenment of first-love.

But human love brings also human folly, and in the days to come Lillian will ask me if I will come to the front of the school assembly to tug her hair when it's her birthday - ten tugs - as is the tradition, one for each year of her life. Of course there will be uproar among our friends. Hers will be jealous I did not pick them to love, while mine will be merciless in their teasing that I could ever like a *girl*.

I lie awake for days, dreading this event so much that on the morning in question I invent a tummy ache, and when Lillian stands up proudly on the school stage to proclaim her love by calling out my name, I am not there. She's embarrassed then, let down by love, and quickly chooses one of her smug school-chums, and the pair of them make fun of me on my return - rejecting as ludicrous my tales of tummy ache, and Lillian, her heart bleeding throws my love back in my face.

My father is quiet now, his tale hanging mid-sentence, attenuated by the heat of the lounge here in Marsden Hall, and by the enigma of the frozen chess game. The memory of Lillian

remains like a splinter in my brain though. It's strange; I have not thought of this for a long time now, have not thought of my betrayal of her love in such vivid terms before. I am forty five and find myself overflowing with guilt for something I did as a boy and cannot possibly atone for.

What is it telling me, this thing, this serendipitous serpent from the darker layers of my unconscious? It is reminding me, I think, how often I have been seduced by the idea, and by the loveliness of love, but when love demands a test, I am unwilling to allow myself to be transformed by it,... to trust in the sureness of its direction.

Perhaps then, I have never truly been in love.

Chapter 3

My return to Marsden after twenty years has not aroused much interest among its current inhabitants. All the old families I remember have gone and in their place there seems to have grown up a generation of cheap commodity worshippers who swear in front of their children, and they sneer at anyone who looks or acts in even a vaguely intellectual way. They hawk and spit in the street. "I am not civilised," they seem to say, "and neither should you be. Those days are gone. Marsden has grown ugly. There is no place here for dignity, for tidiness any more."

There are politicians on the television who say my country lacks something they call social cohesion - others say it has always been this way. But something *has* changed. I feel it, after so long abroad. It's a loss of innocence perhaps? We tore the veil of respectability from corrupt authority decades ago, but for want of something to replace it, we left it alone, content to sneer at it, and by our sneering cynicism have corrupted something in ourselves as well – the sense that things could ever be any better than this.

On returning from California I lived for a while in the feral cesspit that is my nation's capital, resisting the call of Marsden. There, I trained as a teacher, not because it was something I wanted to do, but more something I felt I *could* do in order to earn a decent living, and in an environment that was more stable than the cut and thrust of a here-today and gone tomorrow software house. There was also the advantage that even a poor specimen of a man, and one clearly past his sell-by date, could outrank a bright young girl, for whom teaching was a calling, simply because he was a man and there are nowadays so few men interested in being Primary School teachers. But on completion of my training, of the openings I explored, all were dead ends until I saw the post of teacher advertised at Marsden Church of England Primary School, my old school. It seemed like fate was calling, and I had known then for sure my path led home.

It's not without irony then, that it is to Marsden C. of E. Primary School I have returned. There is a peculiar meaning in this – one I have yet to untangle. Hopefully it will become clearer to us both, as this narrative unwinds. It is a Victorian school-building, and still immediately recognisable as the place, where I spent a good deal of

my childhood.

The smell of it, the sound of it, the feel of it – all of this awakens in me images I have spent my entire adulthood in ignorance of having retained. Memories of events, faces and conversations echo from the walls at odd moments, sometimes pulling me up mid-sentence, so the children who are now my charges think me strange and start to giggle.

These are not good times for the profession however. In my childhood, there were always a few children in a school whom you could picture in future years having landed themselves in prison as the result of some unspeakably vile act. But now, insolent and physically violent children are a tiresome feature of every classroom at Marsden C. of E., so that I and my colleagues spend our days simply maintaining order, in what can appear at times to be a place overrun with excited primates, armed with sharp pencils. Meanwhile the decent children go entirely unnoticed.

You cannot touch the nasty children of course, and one's only means of discouraging bad behaviour is a kind of psychological warfare in which the good behaviour of the few is rewarded in the hope it will set an example for the demented to follow. It's a good idea – humane, enlightened, I suppose, nor is it in my nature to dole out corporal punishment anyway, but I find all this fussing about tiresome, and demeaning.

It's a small staff here, all of them young women, overseen by an older, chilled blonde beauty of a headmistress called Davinia Barkwell. From what I can ascertain from the gossip among the girls, Davinia has as much natural aptitude for teaching as me – which isn't much, I'm afraid. But she's ambitious for an Advisorship at County Hall, and it strikes me that a modern head requires little in the way of teaching skills anyway these days, so this should not be a handicap for her. So far as I can tell, the modern head is a businessman, a promoter of image, a writer of mission statements, a controller of budgets, and sometimes also a dominatrix. And I believe I am in love with her.

It's remiss of me, I know; I should have mentioned this to you sooner. Anyway, this is what I'm thinking of as Davinia upbraids Felicity, a slight young girl who has had the temerity to wear nail varnish to school. Felicity is not a child, but twenty six, and the nominal head of the infant primates. She is blushing, submissive, and so near as I can tell the best classroom teacher at the school.

However, Davinia has a strict dress code for both staff and children, which forbids adornments like nail-varnish, and jewels. For myself this is not a problem of course, my own humiliation is merely that I must wear a childish clip-on tie with the school logo on the bottom. I think the point of it is that the knot is forever smart and upright, never lazily tugged down, and it provides, of course, a link of fellowship with the little boys and girls who wear miniature versions of their own. I feel uneasy when I wear it in Davinia's presence though, in case she views the tie as a symbol of her ownership. I did not say I didn't like it, only that it made me feel uneasy.

It's five-fifteen now, and these girls have homes to go to, other lives to live, husbands and children of their own to be with. Yet here they are in Davinia's office, eyes downcast in case by some inadvertent expression, they encourage her to go on any more than she is going on at us already. Meanwhile I watch her. She wears a spotless grey suit, crisp white blouse, Cartier watch, black high heels, no stockings. She has light blue eyes, slightly wolverine. She is beautiful, yet paradoxically sexless, and pale, as if she is a thing not quite of this world, and might be ice-cold to touch.

Felicity's telling off is over and now Davinia is addressing all of us. Our teaching plans are slipshod and increasingly late. She is telling us our weekend is void, that our plans must be in her in-box by first thing on Monday morning. Mine are ready to send to her now, but there's no sense in announcing this. I am in love with her, desperate for an approving look,.. but I'm not stupid.

I'm presently renting a house on Mill Lane, and when I eventually leave Davinia's meeting I walk home directly, except it never feels right. As a child I would walk home from school to our house on Marsh Avenue, and half of my journey now takes me along that same route, but I must branch off for Mill Lane. There are strangers living in our house now, and I feel as if I have been displaced by them. I am childishly resentful of this.

I'm thinking as I walk that it's interesting, but also rather depressing, this love I think I feel for Davinia. I began to love her before ever I found out what sort of woman she was, how ambitious, single minded and apparently incapable of love – possibly incapable even of lust. But I was helpless, the feeling leaping out of me before I could do anything about it.

If my wits are about me I can usually circumvent these things. I

know it's not real! I *know* I do not actually love *Davinia*. I am more in thrall to a part of myself I have projected onto her. It's a sign of an imbalance, and one of the things I must overcome. I will never have Davinia, indeed I suspect I do not really want her, yet for now the damaged part of me says I love her, and is driven by the desire to have her love me.

A Jaguar cruises slowly by, black and polished. It pulls over and waits for me. Davinia. My thoughts have conjured her up, it seems. Sometimes she will drive me home, but only I think to tease me. I have not declared myself to her - heaven forbid - but I wonder if she senses it. She is perhaps a little young for me, though I wonder if she might find the notion flattering, an older man teetering on the verge of ruining himself over her.

The power she wields over young girls is based upon their fear that she can seriously interfere with their lives, make them late for home-times, send them willy nilly on training courses in unfamiliar parts of the county and which will further make them late for home-times. I'm different, older, not so easily frightened, and even if she dismissed me, I could find myself other work. She must know this, yet still finds me quietly submissive. What other reason could there be than that I am in love with her?

The passenger door flicks open. The offer of a ride is taken for granted, also my acquiescence. No words are necessary.

The Jaguar has an expensive smell which I enjoy: leather seats and the scent of Davinia. She has nothing else to spend her money on I suppose except cars, and quality clothes. The last time I rode with her I picked up a stray blonde hair on the back of my coat. I have looped it tightly and placed it in an old silver locket I once found in the mud on one of the paths that wend through Durleston. I keep it in my pocket as a charm.

"It's kind of you, Davinia, thank you."

There's no reply, just a tight little smile. Actually I would rather be walking tonight. The skies are leaden and there is a fine drizzle. The air is still one of anticipation and change, and I had thought to read it by the feel of the evening on my face.

"You *can* drive, can't you Richard?"

What does she mean by this? Is there a trip, a meeting, an after hours training course she's planning to send me on? I hope not - I want to settle down regularly and reliably in the mud of Durleston for a while, to wallow in it, to come up smelling of it. I have not

come back to be an ambitious, nor even an interested professional man. Those days are gone. But she'll think me pathetic if I tell her I cannot even drive.

"Em... yes, I can."

"Just no car?"

"That's right. I rarely leave the village these days. I really have no need for one."

"Yet you travelled so widely at one time? Don't you feel cooped up here? It's rather a small place."

"I was born here."

"You were? Really?"

"Yes."

One would think I've surprised her, yet I'm sure I've mentioned this before – so what is she hinting at? With Davinia, there is always an undercurrent.

Her skirt rides a little above her knee as she works the clutch. Her legs are smooth to a degree that surely betrays her vanity, and regular applications of hot wax. She enforces such strict rules against feminine adornment, yet her long blonde hair is worn loose, not repressively wrapped, or clipped up. What does this say about her?

Oh,... stop it Richard.

It's raining more heavily now and the tyres are raising a hiss from the wet road. I look at her hands upon the wheel: they are pale and slender and ringless, and I wonder if my day has left me sweaty, I wonder if she can smell me, if I seem repellent to her: stale, unclean, and old against her young, icy freshness,... and her smooth legs.

Ah, here we are; so soon!

"Thank you again, Davinia. I'll see you on Monday."

"You'll not be at Church?"

"Church? Yes of course."

"Then I'll see you on Sunday."

"Yes, on Sunday."

Did I mention I go to church every Sunday? I sit quietly at the back, while she sits at the front, apparently hanging on the vicar's every word. I had not thought for a moment she ever knew I was there.

"Good night then, Richard. Have a pleasant weekend."

"Thank you, Davinia. You too."

My heart is aching as I watch her go. There's such a sweet misery in it and, though it's clearly hopeless, in some perverse way I feel empowered by it. It's self-indulgent of course, but every man must have a noble cause, and lost causes are the noblest of them all.

Chapter 4

My father is remembering the trick whereby we doubled the range of the gun by dripping oil into the chamber, then firing it dry, before putting a pellet through. And as he talks, weaving over me once more the spell of past dreams, I smell the oil, feel its greasiness between my fingers, see my fingerprints in the blued metal of the barrel, smell the linseed I have rubbed into the stock. I smell the leather of the strap, feel the shock of the spring as the pellet is loosed, hear it smack against the tree and the flapping of an outraged bird.

"Do you know who rents the Willet place these days, Dad?"

There is no reply. These anecdotes have a momentum of their own. He might have heard me. He might answer me tomorrow or next week by way of some other seemingly unrelated tale that yields the information I'm after. But for now with the ending of his story, his eyes rest once more on the frozen game of chess.

I wonder, during these visits, if I should move a piece, but I don't want to disturb the pattern of it, and what, in its abstractness, it might mean to him. And my knowledge of chess these days, like most of the other things I once thought I understood, is dull and dimly grasped now – any ability I possessed being handicapped by the slow muddle of my thoughts.

We are in the lounge of the care-home, as we are most evenings now, an audience of other faces, all vacant, surround us. And in these long silences, when my father seems to have slipped back into his unconscious, I try to take in what else I see of this place – the aged, propped up, some with attendant Zimmer frames, the less fortunate with chipped and dented cylinders of oxygen – and I'm thinking could they not be spared the humiliation of something so obviously old and used – yet it seems a lot of trouble to paint the cylinders up like new – and would the poor souls even notice?

Contrary to popular cliché, the carers here *do* care. They wander around in their pale green bibs, bringing tea and talking to the old folks, and always they smile. There is nothing heavy, or rushed or *too busy* about them at all. The girl who seems to have taken a shine to my father is called Chelsea. She is the same age as his granddaughter, a woman who does not know him, and has never had any interest in doing so on account of his material poverty, and

the unlikelihood of there ever being anything in it for her. Unlike my stick thin daughter, Chelsea is rather a plump girl. She is also fragrant, delicate in her manners, and possesses blonde hair so voluminous and fine she must be related to the fairies, for nothing so beautiful could ever exist in this mundane world without the help of magic.

In our brief talks up to now she has told me how she gained pitifully few GCSE's, and spent all of her time at the Middleton Beacon School (now a Specialist Science College), merely surviving its incompetence, and its apparent inability to protect her from the bullying of other, slimmer girls. Yet she seems intelligent to me, and far more empathic than the rather haughty nurse I sometimes see patrolling imperiously, like a ward sister from the starched heyday of the National Health Service. It's Chelsea who intuited my father's love of chess, and though she does not know a bishop from a rook herself, she sets up for him these breathtaking snapshots of grandmasters' games.

"You've been a bit tired today, haven't you Mr. Hunter?"

Chelsea drops casually onto her knees by his chair and lays a gentle hand upon the back of his. I don't know what this tells her, but for me it is the hint that I am straying close to bed-time.

"I'll see you tomorrow Dad," I say, and then I mouth my thanks to her, emphasise it with a nod. She receives it with an open and unaffected innocence, and with a smile. *Thank you, for doing for my father what I cannot bring myself to do.* She must love her work, I'm thinking, or she could not bear it, not care for these old folks, adopt these strangers with their inconvenient needs as her charges. How many tests of selfless love must she pass in the course of a single day?

She walks me to the door. This is kind of her because I'm sure I'm not part of her job description. It's rather a fine house, Marsden Hall, once home to the Christie family, magnates in coal and cotton, but now preserved as the last port of call for many of Marsden's disowned old-timers. And sensing perhaps my inner turmoil, and reading it as a distress caused specifically by my father's state, she smiles and tells me he will be all right. I return the smile and tell her with a peculiar twist of black humour that my father is dying. She maintains the smile, broadens it even and tells me, that while that may be true, he will still be all right.

Chapter 5

I tell myself I do not remember much of my wife, nor my children, though this is such a flimsy barricade, painful projectiles rain over it with ease. Let me summarise them so far in the hope they will seem less barbed, if I can set them down on paper:

My son is nineteen and in his Californian drawl has called his father a loser and an ass-hole. My daughter is eighteen, has been on the pill since she was fourteen, yet managed to fall pregnant twice, aborted twice, and all taken in her vain, stick-thin stride. They seem alien to me, vague souls I once cradled with my love, now sucked into this rising monster of a world I know nothing of. When I allow myself to think of them, it pains me they should have to make their way in such a place, so morally unprepared. But each generation is assured of its own superiority, and in an amoral world, a sense of morality and finesse, a sense of dignity, can only be an encumbrance.

And my wife?

No...

Later. We'll deal with her later.

So, for now I pull the shaded canopy of Durleston over me, lower my eyes to the path and walk on. I rest assured they have never heard of this place, that I am safe here.

Patches of ancient woodland, like Durleston, still survive for the same reason they were not cleared by the early farmers – because they occupy the awkward dells and hollows and the river valleys, places too steep to plough or sink foundations to a regulation depth. The only dwellings to be found in these woods are lone survivors of an age when most of the land was like this, a land of ancient trees threaded through with leafy paths. Small-holdings, pre-industrial weaver's cottages, and old mine-buildings. Few remain now – no drains, no electricity, and long mucky paths to make their access tiresome for a generation softened by the technologies of convenience.

The Willet place, by fate, or something darker, has managed to hang on. It is a lone, two storey house, a weaver's cottage in ancient days, quite low – built of stout beam and brick, all thickly rendered with a white-painted, pebble-dashed concrete. It has small windows from where, of an evening, even in modern times might still be seen

the amber glow of an oil-lamp, or a candle. There is electricity, but it comes from a diesel powered generator – as for drains I dare not guess, but have long suspected earth closets or some other foul antiquity.

It was never an idyll: it always looked too neglected for a romantic nest, and was more easily imagined as the haunt of a witch or a mad old man. My anxiety in its vicinity is not helped by the fact that it was indeed, throughout my childhood, the haunt of a mad old man – old-man Willet who slowly rotted into drunken decrepitude there, old man Willet whose instinctive reaction whenever he saw any of the village children stealing up on his domain, was to rage at them in some demented language and run at them with a hammer.

Even now, I hesitate, when I make my rounds by the old place – though now I realise it is a public way that runs past his gate, and not, as we believed in childhood, a suicidally daring trespass. But for all the closeness of this unfrequented path, the Willet place, or more properly Durleston cottage, seems to shrink back, drawing its neglected grounds about it like a decaying veil, shunning scrutiny, so that I can barely bring myself to meet its gaze, in case I'm thought too forward, disrespectful of its solitude, and its perpetual mourning for some long past tragedy.

My father tells me it had lawns once, running down to the Rye, and flower beds and neat, brick walls, but they lie in ruins now, threaded through and crumbled to dust by the roots of opportunist saplings. And in the overgrown grass and weeds there lie the rusted remains of old cars, some of them from before even Willet's day. The track down to this place is two miles of deeply rutted lane, too much for a wagon with a skip I suppose – but how else to get rid of all this rubbish? Willet has been a long time dead, yet it looks to me as if not a finger has been lifted since his passing.

But someone is living there!

I've seen the flitting of a shadow in the overgrown mess of the garden, like something lithe and quick running to ground. And there is that sound again, the jingly-tinkle of a chain. As unlikely as it seems then, the evidence of my imagination suggests there is a woman in chains, in the ruins of Durleston Cottage, here in the deepest, darkest part of me.

Am I fantasising? I am not a masochist. A chained woman holds no allure for me, yet the symbolism cannot be ignored. A chain

speaks of imprisonment, enslavement, bondage. And in the mythology of my past, she has been here all along, this poor wretch. My fear of old man Willet blinded me to her presence, for if I'd known, surely I would have risked all to release her by now? Except I'm not interested in her. It's Davinia who draws my thoughts, Davinia the goddess of all that is hopeless.

Chapter 6

All right, we've been flying a bit high. Reading back I realise my prose has also become a little turgid. So, let's settle down to earth for a while – and there's nothing like a day at the chalk-face for doing that!

Robert Guyson has stabbed Belinda Fenwick in the buttocks with an HB pencil, in retaliation for her cutting off a very large piece of his hair, laying bare an impressive amount of his scalp, with a pair of scissors she brought especially from home. I find myself amused by the scalping, since Robert was fool enough to sit still while she did it, but the peevish stabbing has resulted in two hours in A+E followed by an irate, slatternly fishwife of a mother who has called me an "incontinent idiot".

I did not bother to correct her usage.

In my defence, I must add that at the time of the incident I was momentarily distracted by the appearance of several spit-balls on the back of my jacket, and had been rounding on the usual suspect – a snot nosed simpleton called Amanda Becket who responds to even the slightest telling off by deliberately wetting herself. As you might appreciate, I have learned to be rather circumspect in my dealings with her.

Davinia has made a dreadful fuss about the health and safety issues, and seeks to head off the possibility of legal proceedings against the school on the grounds of our – by which she means *my* – neglect. She has held me back in her office after school in order to gather the facts, but throughout our interview she has worn an impatient scowl, and I suspect she agrees with the fishwife and thinks me a fool. My incompetence I'm sure she takes for granted.

Thus far, I have never found her particularly supportive and this pains me of course on account of my ridiculous infatuation for her. So, anyway... we have sat late in her office, she flicking out her long blonde hair, a sign of irritation, I've learned, while all I could think of was how much I desired her tenderness, and wished she could be more sympathetic.

Her beauty, combined with this high-handed manner has ensured all the mothers hate her, while all the fathers are no doubt, like me, desperately in love with her. The enigma of Davinia remains that for all her beauty, she seems entirely unconscious of it,

quite wooden and sexless in her manner, and I wonder if this can possibly be genuine, or if it might take only the slightest overture on my part in order to unleash a lifetime of pent up lust.

Such are the juvenile fantasies of infatuated middle aged men!

While I pondered this, against my better nature, the conversation proceeded along familiar lines: normally with a large class, statistics dictate that there will probably be a few children who are educationally subnormal – forgive me, I'm not sure I can still use that word. Anyway, these are children who in earlier times would have gone to a special school, but who are integrated into mainstream education and require the one-on-one supervision of a special needs teaching assistant. This strikes me as economical madness, but it helps to spread the load, simply on account of there being a greater number of adults in the room.

I have noted that smaller classes at the school have two such assistants, while I have none. The reason is simple – though it's obvious to me some of my children are insane, none have been officially documented as such, so, following the scalping and the stabbing, I have taken the opportunity to ask if certain children could not be reconsidered. To this effect, I have a list in my diary – a black book of black names. As I produced the book, Davinia deflected me with a wave of the hand.

"If you feel yourself to be so overwhelmed by things, Richard" she says. "I can bring the matter up with the governors."

Her words cut me. I'd wanted her to look upon me as a safe pair of hands; an older man, reliable, knowledgeable of the world... travelled... even, dare I say... wise? Of course it's a fantasy. I have lived in America, but in twenty years never ventured more than a hundred miles from my home on the west coast. I could have stayed in Marsden and been equally less well travelled. But it's worse than that: now I'm sure Davinia sees me as on old fool, barely able to cope.

"Let me see how I go on with them, Davinia."

"As you wish, Richard."

"Thank you."

No. It's not been a good day. I'm jittery and tired, and dreading the morrow lest the fishwife be waiting with news her daughter has contracted septicaemia in the night and passed away. Sad to say this sort of thing is typical of my days, and so, with the stress associated with such things, I walk the woods more and more.

From Mill Lane, where my house overlooks the canopy of Durleston Wood, I can make a circuit in an hour, thread my way through the horseshoe of the Rye, and at some point, something will happen. I can begin, as now, in a fretful state, my pace hurried, my breaths ragged, but I proceed secure in the knowledge I will end with a meditative stride, my arm having been taken by a benign ghost.

These are strange energies, imaginary of course, and not to be taken literally, but always to be welcomed because they talk to me, calm me, ready me for sleep. You might think me mad, but it's always been this way, here in Durleston, when I am alone. I might have to make two circuits on occasion, or sit for long periods beneath the beech tree – sometimes until dusk comes stealing over the meadows, and the mist rises from the Rye, and the bats flutter out in the moonlight. Like tonight.

It was already late when I set out, and now as I come by Durleston Cottage it's a little after sunset, my heart still aching after Davinia's cruel indifference. I feel spurned and worthless, a lone ghost trailing on my arm, listening to my confession and gradually easing my load. The cottage comes into view, and I am naturally distracted by it. The ghost seems to sense something and slips quietly away. I feel suddenly empty without its presence.

The sky is still perceptibly blue when glimpsed through gaps in the canopy, but the track is hard to see and Durleston is for all practical purposes quite dark now. There's a light showing in an upstairs window of the cottage, a candle flickering. The way it moves, casting shadows this way and that, is most striking and eerily beautiful. And as I watch the candle light, I'm thinking of the chained woman, of her face. I imagine her watching me through some hidden spyhole, as she watched me before through the balsam, and I wonder what she means by it.

Then I'm aware of another light in the distance, a vehicle moving along the track. It's come from the direction of Middleton and can only be making for the cottage, because the track leads nowhere else. It draws level with me as I make my way and I step into the hedgerow to let it pass. It's a huge Japanese off-roader, and on drawing level with me it stops. A window slides down, but halts defensively, half way, and a face looks out – a man, clean shaven, neat short hair, middle years, like me. His eyes are curiously dead, I'm thinking, as if he cannot see what he's looking at.

"Can I help you?" he asks. His tone is rather sharp.

"I don't think so," I reply.

"What are you doing out here at this time of night?"

Were I an aggressive sort of person I'd tell him to mind his own business, but my view of aggression is that it is quite useless unless you are prepared to escalate things as far as they can go – which inevitably involves the actual brutal killing of a fellow human being, or dying in the process. Anything else is just childish posturing, and undignified.

"I'm walking," I tell him.

"Late isn't it?"

I smile – not always a good move because aggressive, paranoid types can take it the wrong way and think you're laughing at them.

"What's funny?"

Ah... as I suspected.

"I can see you've had a bad day," I tell him. "That makes two of us, so I'll be on my way. Good night to you."

What is it about the Willet place that attracts these madmen? He's not done with me yet though, because like all egotistical bastards, he must have the last word: "Don't let me catch you creeping about here at this hour again."

Well, enough is enough, and I am only human after all: "Look, I don't know who you are, but I was born and brought up around here, so I shall come and go as I please. And if I chance to be abroad late at night while I'm at it, then so be it."

My language can be over-elaborate, a little flowery and Victorian – you might have noticed – too much time spent with my head in nineteenth century Romantic literature, rather than dealing with the quicker, snappier language of the here and now. When I say things it slows people down, while they search my verbosities for meaning. Usually they dismiss my words and think what they like, but then they'd do that anyway, so I talk as I please and it makes no difference to anyone.

"I don't care if you're the fucking Queen," he tells me, "you stay away from here."

The atmosphere is becoming charged. I can feel it running to ground through my legs. "This is a public way," I tell him. "Any interference with me would be a criminal offence."

"Listen, you fucking muppet, if I see you creeping round my property again I'll tear your twatting head off and shit in it."

Hmm,...

This sounds like a man brought up on video games, and vile movies. To have squeezed three profanities into such a short sentence is impressive though, and that's before we've even begun to consider the stingingly, disrespectfully descriptive noun – though I'm unfamiliar with current usage regarding the word "Muppet". I cannot therefore gauge to what degree I am supposed to be outraged. All right, 'twatting head' is a bit of a contrivance, but more imaginative than merely repeating the word 'fucking' from the earlier part of the sentence. He's an intelligent man then, imaginative in a way, but not at all pleasant – and those dead eyes! He looks like a killer. I do not sense that he's really angry – just aggressive. It's simply the way he deals with the world.

For now he's content to remain in his vehicle and enforce his message with the curiously blunt instrument of his eyes. What's his problem? I'm a stranger, a man on a public way, returning a little late home from a walk in the woods. Anyone of a reasonable frame of mind would not automatically think I was a sneak thief, unless they were of an unusually nervous disposition, or a sneak thief themselves. And this man does not strike me as the jumpy, twitchy type – believe me I would know: if there was ever a definitive tome on neuroses, I am surely its author. It's obvious then: he's hiding something.

"Good night to you," I tell him. I walk away, but he remains a good while, as if to say: I'm watching you.

I don't mean to give the impression in all of this that I was unnaturally calm. It's true, I tend to present an impassive face, a certain *sang froid*, but that is simply on account of the slowness of my brain, rather than the coolness of my thoughts. My emotions however are never long in catching up: I have been threatened on a public way, my freedom to come and go has been curtailed, indeed my sense of personal safety shattered by an intimidating bully. My pleasure in walking meditatively along the horseshoe of the Rye is suddenly tainted by the fear of having my head ripped off.

When I arrive home, I find myself pulsating with a mixture of distress and rage, for I am not completely without ego and take the insult to my self respect about as well as any mortal man. I decide to call the police. But is it an emergency? Should I call 999? That seems a little extreme. Is there not another number for less urgent business? The incident – now rapidly cooling anyway – does not

require an armed response, or an ambulance, just a burly policeman going down to Durleston Cottage to tick the bully off for his bad language and his threatening behaviour. But do such policemen exist any more? I have seen a community service warden, dressed in a police-like uniform, but she's rather a slight girl, and hardly what one might expect to send into battle and not feel ashamed by your own inadequacy –like sending your own little girl out to give your tormentor a kicking.

The following evening, I walk by the Marsden police station. There's no one there. Indeed it strikes me that since my return to Marsden, I've never seen an actual police officer unless they are in a car speeding along to somewhere else. There's a telephone on the outside wall which I could use, and it will connect me to the main police station in Middleton, I suppose. By now though it's all beginning to seem a bit silly. And I'm nervous of the police – certain that whenever I see a uniform, by some outrageous carelessness, they will find a way of criminalising me, because, being a passive kind of man, I am easier to pick on than a hardened criminal.

Yes, yes... I know all of this is paranoid, but in case you haven't worked it out by now, I am not a normal sort of person, and do not think like normal people think. For example, I have lied to Davinia about the reasons I no longer drive a car. It was not that I no longer had need for one – indeed it would be refreshing now and then to escape Marsden. But the truth is I no longer drive a car on account of being fined once for a minor lapse in concentration. On another occasion I was severely reprimanded for using a mobile 'phone while driving, when in fact all I'd been doing was scratching my ear. The policeman had made a mistake but was not interested in my explanations, telling me instead I would be prosecuted if he caught me doing it again.

Ah... how I envy you thicker skinned types who might laugh such a thing off in the company of your friends. But me? Such is my disposition I became thereafter excessively nervous whenever the cops were around, to the extent that I would pull over and wait until my heart stopped pounding and my hands stopped shaking. In the end I convinced myself I no longer needed the car, decided to save myself the anxiety, and sold it. I also tossed away my mobile 'phone, and haven't missed either of them at all.

So, no, I do not call the police, but neither will I stop my walks through Durleston Wood. Not for anyone. And I find it curious that

suddenly there is restored my childhood dread of the Willet place, a sinister presence amid the otherwise cathartic quietude: a dead eyed ogre, but more – now he is accompanied by a beautiful, chained woman. If this were a dream I would be pondering its meaning! I would be wondering why it seems so insistent, so aggressive in its pursuit of me, when I want nothing to do with it.

Chapter 7

I have never seen a vehicle at the cottage before – except for the rotting ones that litter the approaches to it. And such a large, bright, shiny thing as I'd seen that night seemed out of place – something from the present intruding into the past, or a thing straying from vulgar reality into the fantasy of Durleston. I have tested my fear on successive evenings, now, walking past the house – and my fear is considerable – but I do not see the vehicle, though to be fair my fear has kept my perambulations to the daylight hours of early evening.

My choice of the word 'perambulation' here is not unnecessarily flowery. I use it to convey the sense of marking out a boundary by means of walking, by means of asserting my presence. This is not to say I am like a combative tom-cat marking his territory. My motives are of a more metaphysical, and psychological nature. Also there is a slightly supernatural sense to them in that I have now begun exploring the concept of psychic energies – the energies of the wood, and the energies of people.

This might not make sense to you, and it doesn't make much sense to me either, but it does not prevent me from using these ideas to explain a world I find increasingly incomprehensible. Anyway, the energies of the wood: its darkness, its warm-blanketness, its earthiness, all of these things might be figments of my imagination, but in treating them as real, I feel I have begun to see reflected in all things the state of my own psyche, rather than any particular state of reality that exists outside of myself.

And at the centre of myself, there is this woman in chains, guarded by an irrational, egotistical shadow, the antithesis of everything I believe myself to be. And that frightens me, because it suggests at some point I am going to have to deal with it.

The simplest of things are becoming tiresome now. I have already mentioned the giving up of my motor car on account of my neurosis, but there are other more serious problems emerging. At the corner shop, for example, I cannot bear to queue at the tills. To join a queue with my basket of sundries is to commit myself to a course of action whose culmination is the handing over of my money. I cannot leave the shop until this is done.

Are you confused yet?

Committed to the queue, I will begin to experience physical symptoms – dizziness, a tightness around my chest, and my legs will tremble. Worse still is when someone else joins the queue behind me, cutting off my imaginary escape. I am committed you see? I cannot now leave the queue, put down my basket and run for freedom, or I would be thought strange, weak...

These episodes are recognised in dry medical terms, but whatever names they go by these days, they are a very general way of describing what becomes at times a very personal torture. You find yourself timing your visits to the shop in order to minimise the risk of queuing. And many evenings I will walk past the Marsden Fish and Chippery with my mouth watering, but it is a desire whose satisfaction is entirely beyond my reach, since it means queuing half way down the street for anything up to an hour.

These things are not unfamiliar to me, or I could not view them with such detachment. I have experienced them off and on throughout my life, usually at times of stress, or change. In more romantic terms they are a symptom of something trying to break through, to grab attention – not in a sinister way, but in a way that's trying to help, to point the way to better times, to escape, to wholeness. But we deny these things, we suppress them, and they become troublesome.

There is a mark in the mud when I next sit down by the beech tree – a crescent shape, the size of a small coin, and it triggers a memory that brings a ghost brushing its way through the saplings to sit beside me. Her name is Elizabeth. She is a platinum blonde beauty, high cheekbones, rosy complexion – something of the Norse-woman, something of the looks of ABBA's Agnetha about her – or come to think of it, something of Davinia too! And she has come because it is an impression of the heel of her boot that I am looking at... oh... and we are both seventeen.

I should add that women often come to me like this, as the spirits of something unfulfilled, if only because there have been so many women with whom I have imagined a future that was not to be. Elizabeth was a brief hope many decades ago – such a radiantly charming girl. It's lovely to see her again, but she's not really here, you understand? Okay:

"So, Elizabeth, what are you up to nowadays?"

"Oh... I'm married, three children, living in Sydney."

It's always a pleasure when these conversations begin, because I

rarely spoke to any of these ghosts when their presence in my life was a reality. And the things we say, the things they tell me might be as far from the truth as is possible, yet our conversations always possess a soothing plausibility that I am perfectly happy to accept as fact.

"I'm pleased for you."

"Really? Even though we never?..."

"Oh yes... things between us, they weren't meant to be."

I should explain, I'd seen her once, here in Durleston, and knew her to be one of the girls from Lomax's farm – the elder daughter, sister to William, who was in turn an occasional school-yard playmate of mine. The farm lies above the rim of ancient meadows that rise beyond the wood, the last of the land that can be economically cultivated.

Why am I thinking of this now?

I'd seen her only that once, her figure lit up by a shaft of sunlight slanting through the canopy, as she'd stood upon a rickety footbridge over the Rye. She'd had a look about her, like someone contemplating things beyond what she could see, and I'd wondered if we might be kindred spirits.

"I waited for you," I tell her. "Every chance I got, I waited by that bridge for you to come again, so I could ask you on a date."

But the next I heard of Elizabeth was that she'd married and was emigrating to Australia. Now, I'm full-circling back to something unresolved between us that was never even begun... like with Lillian. Also, as with Lillian, I do not need to close my eyes in order to see her clearly, see her smile, see the dimples in her cheeks, feel her warmth as she sits beside me, her arm tucking under mine as if we were old lovers. I feel her sigh swelling into me, and I ride it like a wave.

"Not meant to be," she says.

"Not meant to be," I repeat. And then I ask her: "What am I doing here?"

She shakes her head. She has a secret, yet to tell. For now though she pretends ignorance and instead tries out the size of the boot-print by placing her own heel into it. Her heel is smaller, almost a stiletto. Then she looks at me, one eyebrow raised, a beautifully vivid platinum-blonde arch against tanned skin. And she is telling me: "Not mine..."

Then I feel something curling up my neck, and she is gone.

There's a shiver and a jolt and all I'm left with is the expression, the queried eyebrow of one who has now just emerged from a dense screen of beech saplings. But this isn't a ghost. No, I'm not yet so far gone I cannot tell the difference.

No one would do this, I'm thinking, come across a stranger in the woods talking to himself and then just stand there looking. They'd sneak by embarrassed, or they'd run.

It's *her*: the face from the balsam – though now the time for balsam has gone, and the trees are turning to autumn. Has she been spying on me again? No... she carries a wicker basket half filled with dry twigs. She's been gathering kindling.

I'm ashamed. Twice now I have revealed the abnormal side of my nature to this woman – once with the funeral of the gun and now, talking to ghosts. It is perhaps in recognition of my disadvantage that she does not flinch when my eyes rest upon her own embarrassment, a sort of fair trade: my eccentricity for hers.

She possesses a flawless, dusky skin, almond shaped eyes and a voluminous mane of shoulder length black hair. She's from the East – not China, I'm thinking. Malaysia perhaps? Or Indonesia? Burma? She wears a long, corduroy skirt and a jumper – high necked, both in black, and a pair of ankle-boots.

There is something of the thrift shop about her, something that is very much *last decade*, something borrowed and old and make-do, but what arrests my attention are the tight anklets she wears: dull black leather, about three inches wide, protruding from the tops of her boots. They are not buckled but seemingly riveted in place and with no obvious means of removing them. To each anklet is attached a steel ring, a few inches in diameter. Her wrists are similarly adorned. From beneath her jumper there protrudes another steel ring which sways a little across the roundness of her belly as she moves. It appears to be attached to a length of chain that runs up under her clothes, and is fastened to a choker, partially hidden beneath her high collar. It is this chain I have heard jingling in the shadows by Durleston Cottage, jingling whenever her body moves.

These are not fashion accessories. They are functional restraints, symbolic of course, but also robust and practical in a perverted sort of way. Their purpose is to enable her to be held down by any number of means – arms, legs, neck whilst being sexually used, or while she undergoes punishment of some kind. You're perhaps

wondering at my knowledge of such things, and I hasten to add they are not to my own taste, but, through my experience of a more sexually liberated culture than my native one, I have come to know a little of them.

In its lightest form it is a game whose adherents are of a very particular frame of mind, and they inhabit a largely closed world. In simple terms this woman allows herself to be thought of as the property of another man. She has given herself to him, and no matter how cruelly he appears to use her, and no matter how outrageous this might appear to those of us who live outside of their world, both parties gain a heightened sexual pleasure that they are unable replicate by any other means. I also know that no matter how much romantic sympathy it might arouse within a gentler man's breast, this woman will have no use for him, and will find his gentler ways, his gentler expressions of love too tame to be of any use to her at all.

This is all very strange and not at all what I have been expecting! What to do then? What to say?

"Em... Hello."

"Hello," she replies.

She's afraid. Not of me, I think, but her eyes scan the woods as if for predators – her ears visibly pricked.

"Does he not like you being this far away from the house?"

I've done well. I've managed to surprise her.

"You know... about that?"

"I don't know anything other than what I can see."

She hides her restraints under her sleeves, then makes a clumsy attempt to tuck the hanging ring down the waistband of her skirt. This disturbs me because I imagine it settling near her mound – cold metal against her sex. Perhaps I'm more of a pervert that I thought!

"Have you killed someone?" she asks.

Now it's my turn to be surprised. "What?"

"You had a gun. I saw you breaking it, hiding it."

She thinks I am an assassin perhaps, that I was hiding evidence of my last hit. Does she imagine we are fellow fugitives then?

"It wasn't that sort of gun," I tell her.

"What other sort is there?"

She speaks well. Good English with a slight accent. She is not a recent immigrant, and I suspect she has spent a great deal of time

here, perhaps been educated here. There is a sophistication too, which betrays her years. I have great difficulty estimating the age of women, once past their twenties, but eastern women in particular. She is not as young as her complexion might suggest. She's mature in her demeanour and in her language.

"I can't explain" I tell her. "It just wasn't that sort of gun." And then, thinking this isn't good enough, that I should be able to make a better attempt at explaining myself: "It was for hunting, once."

"But not any more?"

"We don't hunt for things any more. We just buy them from the supermarket."

She thinks on this for a moment, but does not smile at my flimsy attempt at humour. Instead, she squats down suddenly, her chest against her knees, her feet flat upon the ground, and as she drops, the ring strikes the ground so that there comes the sound of the chain beneath her clothes. She looks at me intently, not puzzled any more, her face open, impassive and I look at her in the same way. It is as if we are goldfish swimming in different bowls brought suddenly up against one another, and we just look. I cannot swim into her world, and she cannot swim into mine. We are each of us safe then from the strangeness of the other.

Squatting makes her small. It's not a lady-like posture, but it shows her to be lithe, untroubled by her joints, and as she sits there, she curls her arms around her knees and rocks a little from side to side, like a child.

"Can you help me?" she asks at last.

What does she mean by this?

"I doubt it," I reply, a little too hastily.

This is not what she expects. I'm supposed to say: "Of course, if I possibly can." But I already know too much about her and imagine there is nothing I can do that will not draw me like a hapless sucker into the games she plays with her man – the man of the big four-by-four, and the dead eyes – who has already threatened to separate my head from my body.

I met a man in the woods today.

We talked.

I begged for his help.

I've been a bad girl.

You must punish me.

Hmm...

She looks away. Does she think I'm judging her? I'm sorry for this, for truly I don't mean to, and so I say: "How do you think I can help you?"

"Make a fire?"

"What?"

"Down there, by the river, like you did before."

This is not what she meant to ask me, but something she's made up on the spur of the moment, something lesser, something innocuous to divert attention, to lure me into her proximity while she readies her trap.

"Why?"

She shrugs girlishly. Is she flirting with me now?

"Because it's a good place to sit," she replies. "I have kindling, but no matches."

"I have no matches either."

"Is there no other way to light a fire?"

"We could rub sticks together." I'm joking again, but she replies in all seriousness: "I would like to see that."

It's my turn to divert her attention. "What's your name?"

She looks away, unwilling, or perhaps afraid to give it.

"You can make something up if you prefer," I tell her. "But I've seen you before in the woods, and I should like to call you something, I mean if I were ever to see you again."

She thinks about this and seems to warm to the idea. "Lillian," she tells me.

There is a sudden sound – a snapping twig, a rush of breath. She's alarmed.

"It's just a cow," I tell her. "A cow in the field – up against the fence. Nothing to worry about."

I'm not sure if she's heard me. She slips away, back through the curtain of beech saplings, and is gone – perhaps down to the dry bank where the river bends, where the ring of stones contains the funerary remains of the old gun. Perhaps she's gone there to wait for me to show off my magic for her. But to have followed her would have been to enter her world of my own volition, and I am too old for such stupidity.

We lit a fire and shared its warmth,
Down in a secret hollow by the river.
I've been a bad girl,
You must punish me!

But the name!

Lillian!

It is not her real name, I know, but this only makes it all the more significant doesn't it? that this particular name, out of all the other possibilities should have come to her lips. Lillian! A ghost, an aspiration unfulfilled; love mishandled; a lesson not yet understood: the lesson that one cannot be in love, and not also be expected to act upon it – even if it be at the expense of ruining yourself in the process.

Otherwise, Richard, you are not truly in love.

Therein lies the treasure of love,

And also its disaster.

Chapter 8

We have skewered small potatoes on saplings, my father and I, and we are camped around a fire in the woods. We are roasting them in the flames, wafts of smoke stinging our eyes and filling our clothes with the scent of something old, something primitive. The gun is propped against a tree, a pair of bloodied wood pigeon at its base, to be plucked and cooked that evening.

I am sick, away from school, unable to face the madness of my days, my spirit broken by a brace of bullies who enjoy poking sharp sticks into my soft demeanour. I am fourteen and already a basket-case, painfully aware of my alien nature and ashamed I cannot simply fit in like everyone else, that I cannot simply stiffen up and get on.

The day has been a success – a miracle of sorts, for it began with the realisation, once we entered the wood, and took the gun from its case, that we had forgotten to bring the pellets. If we returned home for them, an hour would be lost, and neither of us would feel like coming back, so the day's potential for sport, for hunting, would be lost.

I had already had a premonition of this event, weeks before, half dream, half reverie, and to guard against it I had hidden a small snuff tin in the hollow of a tree, deep in the wood, and in the snuff tin there were secreted two dozen pellets – ample shooting for a day. My father had been proud of me – and that feeling, that swelling of recognition was the world to me, though I did not tell him of the dream.

I tell him now instead, as he ponders Karpov versus Spassky – Leningrad,1974. Chelsea has left the book open at that particular page – otherwise I would not have known of course – neither I nor my father ever played chess to such a level that we would have understood the beauty contained in these games – though they seem to hold him now. For me it is the date: 1974, as near as I can tell the same year we shot those pigeon and roasted those potatoes – the same season as now, autumn coming on, the wood tasting of a different air, a different energy – sinking what was vital about itself into the ground, so that those of us still abroad must peck at its surface, light our fires and camouflage ourselves all the more in anticipation of its coming bareness. But also, there is the sense that

we are not the helpless victims of our fate, that sometimes, if we pay attention to our inner senses, if we can trust them, though they might seem to be telling us strange stories, we can subvert disappointment... even disaster.

"Are you all right, Mr Hunter?"

Chelsea is bending down. She has nice knees and soft thighs and, for a moment, I would like to touch them, before remembering she's just a child and I snatch my thoughts back into an embarrassed blush. I realise she is not talking to my father. She's talking to me.

"You look hot," she's saying.

"It's always rather warm in here," I tell her. "Otherwise I'm fine."

"If you're sure?"

What can I say? That for the past hour, while my father has been sunk in reminiscence, I've been wrestling with anxiety and narrowly spared myself falling from the chair on account of a sudden dizzy spell? The poor girl would be rushing off to call an ambulance if she knew. But really, I'll be fine, as soon as I get out of here. I am also ashamed this thing should catch me here, where I truly *want* to be, with my father in his last days. I should just be able to stiffen up and get on, for his sake.

"A cup of tea perhaps?"

"Oh, tea would be lovely," I hear myself saying, though I shall probably leave it untouched. She always brings me tea in a cup with a saucer – something I occasionally have a problem with. My hand wants to shake, to rattle the cup against the saucer, make it tinkle a warning sound that all is not well, that I'm some sort of mental invalid.

To compound matters, the dear girl always overfills the cup so the slightest tremor will spill it into the saucer – then, when I pick up the cup, I must guard against the drips soiling my trousers – making patches around my groin so others might think I have made spots on account of a weak bladder. She *must* know this, she *must* be doing it on purpose, because I've never seen other visitors getting a cup with a saucer. Does she mean to show me up? Behind that sweet smile is she laughing at me? Of course she's not. But it feels like she is.

All right, calm down, Hunter. Get a grip, man!

The reason for my paranoia this time is another unsettling chat with Davinia. Imagine this if you can: the atmosphere in her office

is private and cosy. She is wearing a silk blouse that is cut very low, revealing two inches of enticing and unexpectedly generous décolletage, but as usual nothing in her manner tells me she is conscious of the effect this will have on men, or on me in particular.

I should also tell you at this point I lied on my application about being a practising Christian – otherwise, it being a church school, I would never have got the job. I have been covering up by maintaining a regular presence in the Parish Church. An hour a week is neither here nor there to me – and it gets me out of the house, plus it is a marvellous opportunity to see Davinia away from her usual environment. She is no different to me in this respect. She goes to church because she's single, has nothing else to do, and wishes to keep on the right side of the vicar and the school governors. She sits with them at the front, and I while-away the time gazing at the back of her neck, thinking that if I try hard enough, I might raise a tingle there. But she never feels me, never responds in the slightest to my presence. It is also the Sunday smartness I enjoy - the feel of a decent suit, and the look of Davinia, all pure and Sunday-special, and the feelings all of this releases in me,... ah,...

But where was I?

Sorry, yes:

It's not that Davinia has found me out. If all it takes to be a Christian is an hour a week, then even I can do it, but one Sunday when she sees me with my head bent in prayer – she sees *in* me more than I really am, and does not stop to consider that all I'm actually thinking during that moment of prayer is what I should make for tea.

In her eyes then, my presence under God's roof outranks the dedication of the proper Christians on the staff whose faces I never see in church at all. Suddenly I am valued for something I am not, and find myself promoted to the role of Religious Education Coordinator. It is a recognition of sorts – even a token increase in pay, but in return this makes the upcoming Nativity play my responsibility. On the one hand, I am overwhelmed she thinks me worthy – indeed that she thinks of me at all – while on the other the thought of the role fills me with dread.

"Em... thank you, Davinia."

Of course it will be a disaster! My class of reprobates are unable to follow even the simplest of instructions, such as: 'sit down and be

quiet'. How they will manage to integrate with the greater school for an hour's song and dance, with papier-mache sheep and costumes, and shepherd's crooks, I cannot imagine. There will be carnage. I am not a teacher, or this would not be a problem for me. I am not being sincere to myself. But in order to do that, you must first know yourself, and if I don't know myself by now, will I ever? And how can you know yourself when the world insists you wear such a plethora of disguises all the time?

No. I am not a teacher.

Davinia, I am in love with you.

No, I am not insane, or strange.

I am perfectly normal!

The cup is rattling. I wake up to this fact just as Chelsea's hand moves in to steady it. "Are you taking anything for your anxiety, Mr Hunter?"

"Yes, large amounts of whiskey."

I'm joking. Alcohol only makes things worse, like coffee. In fact I do not drink either nowadays and it is the coffee I miss the most. This surprises me, because I imagine I would make the perfect alcoholic.

"You're a teacher. I've seen you at the school."

"Yes."

"It must be hard – all that responsibility."

"Only if you don't love it."

She glances away, her empathy revealing to her the full depth of meaning in my words, but what can she do about it? And does her friendliness extend so far as to actually wanting to be my friend? I doubt it.

She's walking me to the door again.

"Why not see the doctor?"

"I might do that, thank you."

And as I leave I'm thinking it's 1974 again. I'm away from school, in the quiet of Durleston wood, roasting potatoes on sapling skewers over an open fire, and my world then, as it seems now, is caving in.

Chelsea is kind. And she might also be right, so I go to see the sawbones. I have no high expectations of him. Indeed I suspect he will be writing me out a prescription for anti-depressants even before I have sat down and fully explained myself.

Selective Serotonin Re-uptake Inhibitors are the usual salve for a

troublesome psyche these days. Something elemental is trying to break through from the unconscious and it wants to tell you something like: *What the fuck do you think you're doing living this way?* But do we listen? And anyway it's a problem easily solved. One's unconscious jangles the same emotional strings in the mind as the conscious – so what could be more effective than simply cutting the strings? It's just that we are made up of our emotions – all right, it's an illusion of sorts, but vital to our sense of who we are – so in cutting them we end up sacrificing our selves in order to go on living in the way that is killing us. If that is not a definition of madness, I don't know what is!

The doctor bends over his pad, pen poised.

"Before you make out that prescription Doctor, I should tell you I probably won't take them."

He's not an unsympathetic man, though I have not consulted him before – preferring my own simple administrations for such minor ailments as have been my lot, but eruptions of the psyche require more than herbs and salves. They need time. And whether we deal with them alone, or with the connivance of a competent analyst, the cure is always going to be as bizarre as the illness.

We are of a similar age, the doctor and I, though he is greyer and thinner on top. He also has the hurried manner of one with too many patients waiting to see him, and too little time to do any of them justice. Is it still his heart-felt calling to heal others? And if I tell him how to heal me, will he listen? Or will his ego prevent it.

"Then... why are you here, Mr. Hunter?"

"I've come to ask if you will refer me to a clinical psychologist."

"I shall... in time... of course, but for now..."

"I know. Take the pills. But in asking to be referred to a psychologist, I did not mean to give the impression I expected you to do it. I'm thinking the waiting list for such things these days is very long. It's what, several months I should imagine?"

"Well... probably yes."

"Then of course my appointments will be routinely cancelled as more urgent cases arise. Time will pass. Six months? a year? And unless I make a terrible fuss, and pretend to be suicidal or homicidal or something, I'll basically just be stuck with the pills, languishing on sick pay until that runs out and then invalidity benefit after that, if I can tick all the right boxes on the form."

He cannot say I am right of course, but he *knows* I am right. He

sighs. "Well?..."

"Let me save us both a lot of trouble. I'd like you to sign me off sick – do they still refer to it that way? I was thinking a month should do it."

"If you feel you need the time it's something we can discuss, but you will have to abide by any course of treatment I prescribe."

"If I collect the pills, you'll sign me off for a month?"

"I would want to see you... regularly."

"If I come back to see you, you'll sign me off?"

Time is passing, the queue of other ailments in the waiting room is not getting any smaller, while I sit there, apparently bartering with him. "Perhaps a few weeks, Mr Hunter – then if you come back to see me..."

Two weeks is neither here nor there, but I'm confident I can negotiate another two next time, so it's agreed, and true to my word, I collect the pills from the pharmacy, but I do not take them. Don't misunderstand me. I have coaxed myself through episodes like this often enough before, and am confident of the drill.

Several things are conspiring in the seeding of this storm – my pathetic infatuation with Davinia, my lack of ability as a teacher, the impending loss of my father, and the apparent waste of my life as evidenced by the log-jam of an estrangement from my family. A month does not seem like a long time in the face of such an onslaught, but all things can be made to feel better, if you can only find a way of transcending them.

Chapter 9

I am drawn to the cathartic quietude of Durleston wood, and I begin to intensify our relationship in a way that my respite from Marsden C. of E. Primary School, and the icy charms of Davinia, will now permit.

But all is not well here. We are both suffering from the stresses of the times. In the summer months, the density of foliage prevents you from seeing more than twenty feet in any direction, granting an illusion of Durleston's invulnerability, but as autumn gathers, and the foliage thins, the wood seems to shrink as the narrowness of the valley it occupies is revealed. Meadows skirt its rim, meadows that have lain fallow now for years. I check the boundary to the north where the wood runs up against the suburbs of Middleton, and I find vulgar notices written in legalese proclaiming the meadows there have been acquired for building. In the future, there will be flimsy houses butting right up against the wood, and already I feel its spirit has shrunk back in anticipation of their coming.

There are pine trees here, magnificent with their mast-like soaring, but in their upper reaches are caught supermarket bags that flap and slap in the wind. It is an unnatural sound, from which the spirit and the quiet ghosts flee yet further. Then there are clusters of spent beer cans, lurking in the grass. They mark the slovenly encroachment of the ignorant and the profane.

This is no more than I have expected to see in the proximity of the wood's abutment to Middleton, but the evidence of my own eyes is no less shocking for having anticipated it, and I draw back, divining the flow of Durleston's subtle energies into its purer regions, where the paths are fewer, and where the council has yet to claim it as an amenity – and thereby set about its despoliation as surely as if it had been purchased by a developer.

Between Middleton and Marsden, at a distance of about a mile from the overspilling detritus of either of these places, the wood bellies out to allow for a wide meander of the Rye. South of here it snakes through a broad horseshoe, then past Durleston cottage, and towards the outlying and uninhabited rural lanes of Marsden. This belly of the wood is dense with oak and ash and beech and sycamore. Pathways skirt its eastern and western extremity, rising slightly towards the meadows above the rim of the valley, but none

penetrate its interior. Fledgeling paths make some attempt to open up its secrets, but end quickly in a confusion of thickets which, to the inexperienced eye, all look the same.

Over the course of a few days I have been rediscovering this region, moving quietly from tree to tree, unhurried, for there is no timetable to my days now other than the rising and the setting of the sun. I've spied no beer cans, no crisp packets, no gaudy cellophane, no dog turds. The scent of the wood here is untainted and powerfully invigorating. The wood of course is not a static thing and thirty years has changed it but eventually, I find the tree, and the snuff tin, and beneath it I light a small fire.

When I open the tin and find the pellets there, I almost wish I had not disposed of the gun. But the significance of the tin is different for me now. It is the memory of a premonition, and the ability we are sometimes granted to see around corners, to take an action that might subvert the course of an unfortunate fate, turn it away from failure. We had sought wood pigeon that day, and duly brought home our prize... but what I'm hunting now is something altogether different. What I am hunting now, is an elusive creature I can neither see nor touch, and I know it only by its feel.

Whatever *it* is, its feel is love. Not the love I fool myself into thinking I feel for Davinia – it's a different kind of love, one that has no object and drifts about in the background of my psyche like smoke. It's elusive and dreamlike, and there is the whole of life in it.

I last felt it while sitting on a beach in California. It was just days after Faye had told me that I bored her, and I had begun to suspect, for the first time our marriage might actually be over. Staring into the fire now in Durleston wood, I am returned once more to that beach, to the sepia sunlight of evening, to the wash of the waves, and a sense of incomprehensible loss. It is at such moments we are most open to the unknown – at other times we might still think we are in control of our lives and we struggle on, blind to any sense of purpose. But as I stare into the sunset I am a man who has let go. I sink into deep reverie, and find myself embraced by love – as if the unknown has taken pity on my dejected spirit and sought to fill me, to sustain me with the one thing it possesses in abundance.

Now I am drawn back from California, from that evening, one of the last evenings I spent in America, disturbed by the sound of a

creature taking flight. There is something discordant in the sound, and it makes me uneasy. For several days now I have had the sense of being stared at. She moves like one who knows the woods, but I have the advantage in knowing this one far better than she – also her chain tends to give her away. I do not always hear it, but rather sometimes I am alerted by the creatures she disturbs – the birds, the squirrels, the occasional deer. I'm not sure what to make of this, but I am reminded that it does not always do to stalk your fate. Sometimes it is better to sit still and let it come to you.

So, I have shaved the bark from a birch sapling, and am roasting potatoes in the flames, when she steps into the clearing. She's wearing jeans today, rather baggy and unflattering. Also an old Anorak over a tee-shirt, all pitifully dowdy. The anklets and wrist bands are hidden, but the collar is on plain show – the chain descending to goodness knows where, and there is a stout iron ring at her throat. The collar is studded, like a dog's, but unlike a dog's there is no obvious means of removing it. Also, it looks tight, so that even swallowing seems to require a deliberate effort.

She squats by the fire and extends her hands towards it for warmth. I say nothing, but offer her a potato, which she takes gingerly from the sapling, and begins to nibble at it gratefully.

"Thank you," she says and then, after a moment: "What should I call you?"

"Call me what you like."

She shakes her head and smiles playfully. "You must choose. I chose Lillian for you. Now you must choose something for me."

"All right. Call me... I don't know... Adam?"

"Adam? Yes. That will do." And then: "That looks like a sharp knife, Adam," she says, observing the pruning knife I have left open on a stone by the fire.

"It's quite sharp, yes."

"Sharp enough to cut this, do you think?" She indicates the choker by putting her fingers through it and pulling sideways to leave a gap of air between it and her jugular vein. The vein stands out against her delicate neck and I wonder if she means anything by revealing it to me in this way.

"Possibly," I tell her.

"Then cut it for me, will you?"

"Is that what you wanted last time we spoke, for me to cut those things off you?"

She smiles and offers me her throat once more but I shake my head. "I'm sorry, Lillian. We both know what it means if I cut them from you. Those things are a matter between you and your Dom. I think that's the term you use isn't it?"

Intrigued, she looks sideways at me, as if to examine something she had not thought was there before. "I don't know the words for it," she says. "But I'm sure you are correct."

"I've met him, by the way."

Her eyes betray a mixture of surprise and alarm. "He spoke to you?"

"Yes. He was very rude."

Her lips tighten now. Is she smiling? Does she find my understated language amusing? She lowers her eyes. "He can be rude. I'm sorry if he upset you. He's nervous with strangers."

"Suspicious perhaps, aggressive, but not nervous. If you want them cut off so he can punish you, you must cut them off yourself. Okay?"

She thinks about this, understands I am not to be so easily manipulated, then holds her hand out for the knife as if she does indeed mean to cut them for herself. But even that would be a symbolic act, because knives are symbols, and this is *my* knife, so I tell her to go and find own. But what could be more symbolic than the fact that she is here anyway – this woman who has chosen of her own free will to be known to me as Lillian, and who has now asked me to cut her bonds, to set her free?

Of course I know at some point, I am expected to cut these contraptions off her, and by doing so release her presence more fully into my awareness. But I cannot do it. She casts her eyes about her now, as if searching for a different script and expects it to be hanging from a tree.

"I'm in trouble," she tells me.

"Oh?"

"I haven't seen him for weeks."

"He comes and goes?"

"Yes."

"How do you manage for supplies? I don't recall ever seeing you in the village."

"Oh no... I never leave the woods," she tells me. "Well... look at me? What would people say? No, in fact, he doesn't like me leaving the house. As for supplies, he brings me what I need."

"But you never know when he's coming back?"

She shakes her head. "He's never been away so long as this before. I think he may have abandoned me. But that's sometimes part of the... game. You understand?"

This cannot be true. She's playing on my sympathies, so I try to ignore the feeling I am somehow obliged to help her, simply because we have named each other. "When was the last time you ate properly?"

She gives a shrug. What kind of game is this? She's skinny, but clearly not starving.

"It sounds a dangerous business to me, Lillian."

"I have few choices at the moment." She looks around. "This is a very quiet part of the forest. What are you doing here?"

"Being quiet. What are you doing here?"

She sighs, dejected, or at least pretending to be. "Watching you."

"Why?"

"We seem the same."

"Oh?"

"Both prisoners," she explains.

I don't understand this. "What do you want from me?"

She shakes her head. "You have already said you will not do it. "

She speaks softly. There is a vulnerability in her tone, and even though I suspect these are all affectations, I find myself becoming susceptible to them.

"Have you everything you need at the house?" I ask her.

"Sometimes it's cold. And I'm afraid he won't come before things run out."

"It doesn't sound very... healthy. You're living out of tins I suppose?"

She nods.

There is something very queer about all of this. She does not seem submissive. Instead she strikes me as being quietly manipulative, and for all her distress, very self assured and very familiar... with me.

"Do you not like me?" she asks.

"I don't know you well enough either to like or dislike you."

"It's just that I feel you do not like me. Is it the way I live? Is it these things I wear? You understand the meaning of them, I think, and you do not like me because of them? You think I am... depraved... you think I'm a whore."

"How you live is up to you – I don't judge others."

She thinks a while. "I can see that is true. Perhaps you go further. You don't judge others because you do not see them. And you do not see them because you deliberately reject them. You push them away. You want nothing to do with them. You disconnect yourself from them, from the whole world."

"What?"

"You like the forest because you feel invisible in it – that's why you spend so much time here, Adam."

I smile – but sometimes we smile in self defence do we not? I think that's what I'm doing now. Yes, I'm trying to become invisible – and have largely succeeded, except for her. Her eyes are everywhere.

"You've got me about right then" I tell her.

"It's not good for you to be this way," she says.

"On the contrary; it's important for me to be this way right now – at least for a little while. You're right; people drain me. I can only live among them if I can withdraw from them now and then – recharge myself, like this."

"Is there no one who energises you, Adam?"

"Not really."

I see her thinking about this, and then I tell her: "You're even more isolated than I am. I can come and go freely. But you – if you'll forgive me – you are the only prisoner here, a slave to one man's perverted desires."

"Yes," she says. "But look at you: you say you are free, but I do not see a happy man. We are both in chains. Both of us in need of rescue. Shall we not rescue each other, then?"

Chapter 10

So... a man rents a lonely old house and hides a woman in it. Then he comes and goes as he pleases, uses her to fulfil his sadistic fantasies, and though he guards his territory, it strikes me it is the instinct of the tomcat that drives him, that he might even have other women tucked away in quiet little corners like this.

I wonder how much the rent will be on the old Willet place – so old, so run down, so lacking in even the basics. It cannot be very much. Don't misunderstand: given the chance, I would rent it myself, suffer any deprivation, any inconvenience just to live and sleep, and breathe and bathe myself, for now at least, in the mysterious fluid energies of Durleston Wood.

I contemplate this as I gaze from the bedroom window of the house I'm renting on Mill Lane. A generation ago few people rented houses in England, but I am renewing my country's acquaintance at a peculiar time, a time gone far back in time, when only the moneyed classes owned property and rented it back to the rest of us.

It is a modern, flimsy house, already sinking into ruin, smelling of damp and mould and filthy carpets. Like everything I see about me now, it has known better days. My only investment here, apart from the rent, has been a kettle, a new mattress and some bedding. There are holes busted through the stud walling, radiators leak and dissolve away the cheap chip-wood floors, and everything I touch creaks and groans. It all speaks of decline. Of something lost.

The house does nothing to make me feel at home. As the nights draw in I have to rely more on the feeble energy-saving bulbs installed by the last inmates of this dismal little place. They cast a barely adequate light and make reading painful, but a proper bulb would make the meter spin too greedily, and I wonder how it's possible my country could have come to this. Is it my country though, or is it just that my perceptions of it are distorted by a sinking frame of mind?

I spend as little time in the house as I can, walking mostly – returning only to sleep. In my first two weeks of sick-leave, autumn settles in wet, so I purchase a fisherman's bivouac from the Argos store in Middleton, and I take it down into the belly of the wood. It's a lightweight, nylon thing, camouflaged like an army tent and

disappears into the background in such a way that if you did not know it was there, you'd have to fall over it in order to find it. I take up residence inside, when the rain is persistent – it's surprisingly cosy – and I spend my days there in quiet contemplation, reading trash novels and brewing infusions of St John's Wort and Valerian, and I meditate, safe in the knowledge that the foul weather will keep Lillian indoors.

I leave her things, now: a bottle of fresh milk, some fruit – leave them by the fence where she's sure to find them, as I slip by on my circuit of the woods. Compassion makes me act this way, that's all. Anyone would do the same. Other than that, she is nothing to me, and the notion that we can somehow be the saving of each other is ridiculous.

I'm tempted to sleep in the woods, away from Mill Lane, where my neighbours' noisy couplings are becoming more tiresome. By contrast the stillness and the solitude of the wood are a comforting balm, but it's growing too cold now to be sleeping out of doors. I do not pack the bivouac when I go, but leave it pegged down, leave a sleeping bag and stove, in case I should decide to stay. You might think these things would be vulnerable to passers by, but really no one comes this way, and I always find them undisturbed, when I return.

There are tricks you can play with cotton threads, stretched low across the runs, and they are always unbroken when I inspect them, so I know my sanctuary is undiscovered – that indeed only one person other than myself knows I have ever been there. So one morning, when Durleston is still crisp with the cold of dawn, and I discover my first broken thread, I am not at all surprised to find Lillian huddled inside the bivouac, asleep, wrapped snug inside my sleeping bag and covered with a blanket she has brought from the house.

I have lit a small fire by the time her eyes open, and I admit to thirty minutes of quiet admiration of the mystery of her sleeping form. She has the faintest of creases in the corners of her eyes, and her face, in slumber relaxes into an expression of quiet bliss that seems in defiance of her bindings, which speak only of cruelty and unspeakable humiliation.

When she finally awakens, her eyes flicker a moment in fear but she does not move and seems entirely passive to her fate. Then, seeing me, she smiles in a way I have wished Davinia would smile.

What does she see in me that others cannot? Why must it be *her*? It cannot be her! I cannot enter her dark world. Tugging Lillian's hair on her birthday would have been such a tame declaration, yet I proved myself incapable even of that. I look at *this* Lillian in her bindings and her chains, as if at some alien thing. She's asked me to remove them, yes, but how soon before she's asking me to rivet in place my own, and play a kind of game I was not made for? No, that can't be it. I must look more deeply into this...

What the hell does it mean?

I brew tea with milk and sugar, and since I've only the one cup, I offer it to her. She drinks it gratefully.

"Thank you, Adam."

"Have you been here all night?"

She nods.

"What if he were to come back and find you gone?"

She shrugs as if the answer is obvious. "He would punish me."

I wonder what this word 'punishment' means. Is it just that he takes her in a rougher way? Or does it involve beating, whipping and the letting of blood? Just how dark is the path she treads?

"Has he been back since we last spoke?"

She shakes her head wearily. She's afraid – afraid he will not come, but afraid also in case he does. She needs help. I *can* help her. The iron ring at her throat shines dully. I see the need in her but I am reminding myself a simple kind of man cannot become involved with a woman like this – and not expect to be changed, even injured by her.

"It was you who left those things for me? The milk? The food?"

I do not want her to be grateful. "Look, I'm just an ordinary kind of guy, Lillian."

"No one is ordinary, Adam. You are not ordinary."

"I can't get mixed up in your sort of games, that's all. That's what I mean."

"If I said it was not a game? That I had no choice?"

I'm shocked. "I wouldn't believe you. I mean... it's unthinkable... you're telling me you're being held against your will?"

She looks away, gives a sigh – almost impatient, either with me or with herself that she is unable to find the right opening. "Of course not," she tells me, but there is something insincere in the way she says it, so I do not believe her and now my head is spinning and she has me off balance, which is exactly where she

wants me.

"Perhaps it's the way of life I want to escape," she says. "It might be that what you describe as ordinary is something I might want more than anything in the world. You could help me find the way again, surely?"

She's playing with me, something soft and seductive in her voice, but I am wise to it. A man might easily make a fool of himself over her, but she would always go back to her gaoler, for they are of a like mind. Right now I suspect the only thing she's seeking is the thrill of finding him waiting for her with a stern expression and something to smack her with. It is the thrill of her imagined punishment that makes her life all the more worthwhile. What would such a woman want with an ordinary way of living? She is already lost to the drug of darkness. Or am I being too cynical?

"Am I not a little old for you, Lillian?"

She smiles again. She's on the right track now, breaking through to me. "Who said anything about us getting married?"

Now I smile in order to brush away my silliness. It's such a simple thing but we are no longer as we were. The bond tying me to her is already made a little stronger, so now she should pretend to go, in order to test me on it.

"I'm disturbing you," she says, and she throws aside the blanket as if indeed she means to leave.

"You *are*," I tell her.

"I'm sorry," she says, her eyes lowered.

"You're not sorry at all. You don't mind disturbing me, if you think your persistence will win you what it is that you want. But really, Lillian, I cannot help you."

She examines the cuffs at her wrists. They are red where the leather chafes, and she scratches them. "It's such a simple thing," she says.

"No it's not. And I don't understand why you're looking to involve me. I'm such an unlikely choice."

"I told you, Adam. I don't want to play this game any more. I want to escape it."

"If that was true you'd simply cut those things yourself and walk away. You want to make him –I don't know – jealous, so he will feign displeasure and beat you all the harder, or whatever it is he does."

"He does not always 'feign' it."

"You said it was a game."

"Played properly I think it can be." She looks away. "It's complicated. You have not seen the things I've seen."

"If you're afraid of him, why don't you..."

"What? Go the police?"

"Surely, if you're afraid... yes."

"I have no papers," she tells me. "I have no right to be in this country at all. So he can do what he likes with me, and I've no choice but to smile and bear it. I am... his slave."

I'd not thought of this before! "You're... what? An illegal immigrant? "

"Yes. No. I am *now*, but not always. I told you, it's complicated."

"So explain it to me."

She looks at me as if she thinks I am unlikely to understand, but she tells me anyway:

"I worked in London. Before that I was educated here. I have done many things – all of them proper. I am not a bad sort of person, Adam, you know? My legal status lapsed, though no one seemed to care back then. It seemed a technicality. Is that the right word? I have lived a normal life in this country, really, but suddenly these days, questions of foreignness are important, and I find myself a fugitive facing deportation."

"You don't want to go home?"

"My country is hard on those who have nothing. Do you know what poverty is? If you did you would understand better how I would rather pretend to be the pleasure slave of an Englishman, than return to face it. Or do you really imagine that if I had a better alternative, I would remain here?"

"What manner of Englishman are we talking about? How... did he come to putting those things on you in the first place?"

She offers me her wrists, pressed together, as if symbolic of her bondage. "It doesn't matter," she says. And then: "Cut them off."

I shake my head.

"Cut them, Adam!"

"Lillian, my life is falling apart. I can't get involved with someone like you. And you didn't answer my question. What kind of man is he?"

"I needed papers – to stay. I was told these things could be arranged. I thought it was only money that was required of me."

"Then he's what? A criminal... some kind of trafficker?"

"Well, obviously."

I'm not entirely surprised. "My God, Lillian. Surely, even living in poverty at home is better than this. You have to get away from him! Go to the police. Go home to your family. You want an ordinary life – that's surely the best place to find it."

"My family are dead. I belong to an ethnic group that is no longer welcome in my country – you understand this? We have been persecuted since independence from the British in 1960. My parents died in uprisings while I was here, at University."

She's quiet for a while.

Can any of this be true?

"But... surely, you wouldn't be deported if it meant your life would be in danger. There are rules."

"Things are rarely so black and white. Is that how you say it? Black and white? Sometimes the rules are overlooked, and people are deported anyway, because numbers are more important. Personally, I would rather not take the risk. At times like this it is not always wise to trust in authority.

"My parents were... outspoken, intellectuals, professionals – how else could they afford to send a daughter abroad to study? If there is a black list, I am on it and I'm afraid I would be arrested, imprisoned for my name alone – and you know what that would mean for me, in my country? Here I wear these chains, and my gaoler pretends to be cruel, but it's a game and I trust he would never really hurt me. At home it would be a different story. At home, people simply disappear. I am afraid. Do you see that?"

I can feel my stomach churning as she tells me this. I have no experience of the kind of world she describes. There are not many places like that now in the East, but I can think of a few, and I know that what she says is far from exaggeration. She cannot go back and fears to put herself at the mercy of my country, in case my country, with a stroke of the pen, decides to put her at the mercy of her own.

"You need a solicitor, a human rights lawyer... or something." I do not know what I'm talking about, but it sounds right, and as for the details, well they don't matter, because it's not my life in danger, is it?

"No, I just need somewhere else to hide. Adam, if you will not help me, can you at least lend me some money?"

"How much?"

"Oh... a few thousand pounds should do it."

"Okay. I suppose you'll be wanting it in cash?"

She's puzzled and her brows knit together as she scrutinises me. "Are you a wealthy man? I did not take you for a wealthy man."

"I'm not wealthy no. But I live alone, so I'm not exactly broke either."

"And you'd give a stranger two thousand pounds, just like that?"

"We're not exactly strangers are we?"

"But I could be lying to you – I *am* lying in fact. I do not want your money. I'm very happy living the way I do, and I've been a naturalised citizen since 1998. So I need not fear deportation at all."

"Not all of that is true. The only bit I believe is that you do not want my money."

"You puzzle me. You'll give me money, but you will not cut these straps?"

"The money's impersonal – that's just its nature. Cutting those straps is not."

"Some would say a man giving a woman that sort of money might expect something in return – that she would be obliged to him. After all that's how I got myself into this mess in the first place."

"With some men, possibly, but not me. You could take the money and run, with my blessing."

"Then, if I said you would not be obligated if you cut these straps? You fear there might be something symbolic in it? If I told you there was not?"

"You'd be lying. There *is* a symbol in the cutting of them, and it would bind us. You know that. You're playing with me, and I don't understand why – you could cut the blasted things off yourself. I do not want to be bound to you, or have you bound to me."

"I think you do."

"You're wrong, Lillian."

She smiles. "You're afraid, that's all – afraid of what such a thing might mean, what it might make you *feel*. You might not *want* it, but I think you *need* it. Next time you pass the house, and he's not there, don't sneak by like you always do. Knock on the door. And I will open it for you."

She rises then and the belly of the wood grows empty as she walks away. I watch her, the blanket drawn about her shoulders

like a cape, and I feel the energy of Durleston flows past me as it is sucked towards her. I do not want her to leave me now because I will never have the courage to call upon her, and there is something in our weird conversations I am beginning to enjoy. She once asked me if there was anyone who energised me, and I told her no. It was true at the time. But that was before I came to know her.

Lillian energises me.

There comes a roaring up the valley as a sudden wind stirs the thinning canopy and sends a flurry of twisted copper dancing across the clearing in her wake. Autumn is a great revealer: no place in the forest to hide – better to lie still then, or hibernate deep inside a hole. And if you must make a stand, then you should at least be prepared to die.

Chapter 11

My father is remembering the time he showed me how to skin a rabbit. Rabbit populations are subject to boom and bust. Some seasons the meadows are thick with them, scurrying for cover at every turn. In other seasons their numbers dwindle and they become more circumspect in their comings and goings. When times are lean and rabbits more cunning, they fall easier to the snare than the gun. But the snare itself requires a particular skill, a poachers skill. My father and I were not poachers, having had the nod from old man Lomax to prowl his lands at will, in exchange for the occasional rabbit or pigeon – as had other quiet woodsmen. And though these other woodsmen passed unseen to us, as we did to them, their snares were unwelcome competition for our own. It was against the code to physically interfere with another man's snare, and he might reasonably take offence at this, but if you ran your hand palm down, my father said, along the run – the rabbit would not use it, and the owner of the snare would never know. The rabbit would take fright at your scent, and choose another run – the run in which you'd set your own snare.

But the business of snaring, and killing, then skinning a rabbit seemed unnecessary to me, when meat could be bought at the butcher's in Marsden for a lot less trouble, and at a safer distance from the actual blooding of the beast. My father understood this, but tried to explain the hypocrisy of it. If we felt so strongly then we should not eat meat, he said. But if we chose to eat meat, then we should occasionally be prepared to face the awkward question of where it came from, and how much the creature had to suffer in the giving of its life.

The snare seemed a cruel way to die, playing as it did on the animal's instinctive terror and its lack of human ingenuity in being able to extricate itself. A humane woodsman would set his snares late and collect them early. And he would deliver a smart coup de grâce if necessary, but all my life I've had an instinctive hatred of the snare, preferring the cleanness of a gun in the hands of an experienced hunter – even if I must sit for hours for my quarry. But there are all kinds of snare besides a hoop of strangling wire and once caught we humans are just as blind to the possibility of our own redemption as any other dumb creature. So we struggle and we

choke, but in slowing down, in remembering to breathe, the noose slackens and when the noose slackens, we have a choice. Do we make our escape by lunging ahead in the same direction as before, do we remain in silent stillness for ever and await the hunter's death blow, or do we back up and try a different way?

I have been sitting in the bivouac, sipping my Valerian and my St John's Wort, no longer able to meditate, but am filled instead with an overwhelming urge for action. I feel it still, this evening, in Marsden Hall, as I stare at the chessboard all newly arrayed with Lasker vs Bauer and I am more tempted than ever to move a piece. What holds me back is the knowledge of the intellects that brought the game to this pass, and the sense of my own incompetence – that any move I make would be childish. On the one hand my call to action could be Ego urging me back into the noose, or it could be an unconscious volition pressing me towards redemption.

I was able to skin the rabbit that day, and my father was proud of me, but as with many things in life we only pass that way once – and the butchering of rabbits did not become for us a habit. It was the lesson that was important and, though it might sound odd, as many of the old ways do, there is nothing like the killing and eating of a creature for making you respect the sanctity of life, and for facing up to your responsibilities as regards your own.

There comes a point when you *must* act.

My father has been quiet for a while now, sunk back into reverie, into quiet contemplation of the game. I reach out and move a bishop just one square. He raises an eyebrow but does not explode into a wild remonstrance at the illogicality of my move. He simply nods. It may not be the way the masters would have taken the game, but sometimes anything is better than the stalemate of cowardice.

I don't know what it is – such a simple thing, moving that bishop, but it has released something else which has eased some other thing which has released yet another thing unknown in me and suddenly I'm growing bored, sitting in my bivouac in the belly of the wood. I'm still reading trash novels until the fading of the light, but while I read I am thinking of Davinia, thinking of the children at Marsden C. of E. Primary School, and wondering, in all seriousness, what we should be doing for the Nativity play. This is a queer combination, half lover, half teacher, and I have never thought of myself as either before.

Each evening I leave it a little later before picking up my stick, and shouldering my pack. Durleston is thick with life at this hour and as I make my silent way, I glimpse the deer and the squirrels, and the foxes, and I see the owls in their perches where once they were invisible to me. And the river, as it swings by the path, reveals the herons lingering for their supper catch. And often, there is the light in the window of the cottage, a candle glow in the gathering gloom, a ghostly halo around it caused by the mist rising from the Rye.

She has invited me in. This woman. She's alone and lonely and frightened. I could help her, *should* help her, and I do, by continuing to leave her things by the fence. These are practical comforts, but they are also a salve for my conscience because I am afraid to do the one thing she wants of me: cut her bonds and release her into my life. Do I really mean that? Release her into my life? How do I know? I don't. It just feels like it – and I fear it. But tonight I will do it.

I *will* cut the bonds.

She can come home with me and we can talk some more, like civilised human beings and not vagabonds in the woods. It's dark – no one will see us, and she can lay low for a while. She can hide somewhere else, away from him, free from any obligation, find her feet, find her courage perhaps, and I could make enquiries about a human rights lawyer, or simply pass her off as my girlfriend – God knows I could use the company! Not that I would expect anything from her... no... that wouldn't be right, would it? But in time... maybe. If she was willing...

And if it all goes wrong?... as it inevitably will... well, I can simply disown her. Cast her off. Betray her to the authorities.

You think I'm joking?

No.. I probably would not do any of these things, but it seems I am capable of thinking them.

Only rarely do I see the car. And when I do, my heart is heavy – not so much from fear of him, but from the simple fact of his return – that he has come to reclaim his property, a property he knows by another name – not Lillian – her real name perhaps, but it cannot mean as much to him as her false name means to me – there is an intimacy about it, more intimate than anything he can possibly have with her.

It's October now. I've been to the doctor twice, stretched my

time to six weeks, lied about the pills and have an appointment in six months to see a clinical psychologist, but both the doctor and I know the appointment will never happen. I am not suicidal, not homicidal; I am coping, simply not working. Just keep taking the tablets. He fails to mention side effects like impotence, insomnia and fatally high blood pressure. It's as well then, I am not taking them.

I have begun to surmise that Lillian's Dom comes only every other week, on Fridays. So, tonight, being Thursday, I am surprised to see the car. What also surprises me and worries me a little is that he is waiting beside it – waiting for me to come out of the wood along the public way. The dusk is very deep, and he is barely a shadow as I come up to him. Suddenly, he switches on a torch, directs its piercing blue light into my eyes as if he means to hold me there entranced like a frightened rabbit.

"I thought it was you. You've had your warning," he's saying, and his tone suggests no preamble. He has something in his free hand, a short stick, gleaming: it's a tyre iron perhaps or a crowbar? Does he seriously mean to use it?

"Look, I'm doing no wrong here. This is a public way. You have to let me pass." But it's not him I'm talking to – it's old man Willet, dead and gone, but whose unquiet ghost still haunts this part of Durleston.

"I don't have to do anything. Cunt!"

"Woa... now look..."

He's coming.

What kind of man is this? Has he no fear of the law? And if he wants to keep his shag-pad free from interference, why does he draw attention to it in this way. If he hurts me, I shall have the police on him this time for sure. But for now I see only his coming, and am forced to act.

The path is narrow – a fence on one side, barbed wire and brambles on the other. I can turn. I can run, and make to do so, quickly, but then I duck low and drive back with all my might, ramming my stick into his gut so I'm sure I've run him through, then while he's retching I turn and whip the side of his head with it to make sure he goes down. I do not strike him hard – just a quick, sharp blow, then step by while he rolls there, a troll suddenly, and somewhat unexpectedly defeated.

Do I surprise you? I have told you I'm a coward, and a nervous

wreck, but I never said I could not fight. I learned from a Kung Fu artist in America. We did it with sticks. Unless a man has a gun, he cannot touch me.

"Do you think I don't know what goes on in this house?" I tell him. "Do you really think it's so quiet down here? Away from view? Do you want the police to come? Because they will if any of us who live around here have cause for complaint against you."

I do not know for sure the police will come of course, indeed I rather doubt it: I've had my house burgled and my car stolen, and they weren't much help on either of those occasions. It happens, was their implied response. Nor do I know if others are as aware of his business as I seem to be, but there is always a greater safety in numbers, even if they are imaginary, and it might calm him if he feels himself watched, or better still make him move his sordid business elsewhere, and take Lillian with him.

All right... I know...

I had meant to carry her off with me, rescue her. Do the decent thing. But we all make mistakes. And I'm forgetting, it's Davinia I want. Things might be no more than hopeless fantasy with her, but that also makes them a whole lot safer.

Chapter 12

In the morning Davinia calls. This is unexpected. She's checking up, I suppose, like a truant officer, and though she smiles sympathetically, when I show her in, I cringe at her transparency. She has been a teacher too long, and her smile is the smile she paints on for the children she means to win over, while she plots against them – just as her calm, reasoning tone is the tone she uses to explore the fractious elements in the playground. Adult emotions meanwhile are not her forte, and in particular signs of adult distress are disturbing to her, thus she's quite unprepared for the state she finds me in.

I had been ready to return to work, certain of my returning strength, but now I've spent a sleepless night, and look like shit, my brain alive with the possible consequences of my fight with Lillian's demented Dom, who I happen to know is a criminal, with underworld connections. And I beat him up. I threatened him in a way that now seems very much like Canute commanding the tide to turn.

I would have run, I reassure myself – I *was* running – but he was fast and would have laid a hand on me if I had not done something. The first blow was necessary, but having slowed him, I should have run back into the darkness and got round him another way. The second blow was aggressive and it is this that has troubled me. I checked the blow, but I had also been very close to cracking down with all my strength. Such a thing might have killed him and landed me in prison.

That's the trouble with fighting.

Most men don't mean it, and the victor is always the one who cares less for how far the violence is to be escalated. It is the difference between the bar-room brawler and the warrior. I am not a brawler. Consequently my hands are shaking and I'm twitchy – all of this conveying to Davinia the impression I am terribly unfit for work. I hate myself for it because I want her to see me as I'm sure I could be – handsome, fit and strong.

Woa! That's new.

Where did that one come from?

"I'm sorry I'm in such a state, Davinia, do please sit down – I'll make some tea."

"No.... no... I'll be on my way... I just called to see... well... if there's anything... Richard you look awful!"

"I'll be all right shortly – these things come and go. Are you managing to cover the class all right?"

"What? Yes... oh... well... it *is* a difficult class. But don't worry about them. You must concentrate on getting well."

"They are a difficult class, aren't they? We'd be doing a service to society if we poisoned the lot of them, and had the parents sterilised."

Unfortunately she has no sense of humour, but at least I have detected a note of genuine concern for me. Or do I flatter myself?

"Yes... well... goodbye for now. I trust... well... I hope you'll be recovered soon." No... her sentiment is sincerely meant I think, and I take heart from it, but I can also tell she's thinking any speedy recovery on my part is unlikely.

"Please, don't go."

Is there a hunger in my voice? And do I really want her to stay, anyway? She looks surprised – so beautiful and also terribly uncomfortable. I've seen her like this at school with a distraught child. She wants to comfort them, but cannot. The tears of a child will melt the heart of any adult. But she recoils, takes a breath, pulls down a steely mask, and delegates the task to someone else.

I see her doing it now.

"I'm afraid I must," she says.

"Please... just for a moment – I'd like to explain."

Thinking perhaps I'm about to discuss work, she relents and sits uneasily on the sofa as if she's afraid she'll stain her suit. "What is it, Richard?"

Have I imagined her glancing at her watch? I don't know what I'm doing at all – struggling, desperate for one last shot at hanging on to reality, I suppose, though believing not for a moment it will do me any good. I feel I am being dragged into the depths of the earth, and I want to declare my love for her. A last desperate act. "It's... I mean I... "

"Yes?"

"I've been... missing at church, these past weeks."

Pathetic! The coward lets go and plunges straight to the depths of Hell.

"But Richard, you're not well – it's perfectly understandable."

"I should be all right by this weekend. And I *will* be in work on

Monday. I'm really quite recovered now – in spite of appearances. I just need to clean myself up a bit."

I still do not know what I'm saying. And who am I fooling? Richard Hunter has been off with "nerves". He's no longer a safe pair of hands – never will be, and he's getting on now – probably just biding his time towards early retirement. No vim, no vigour, no ambition any more. What use is *he* to a woman like Davinia Barkwell?

"That's up to you, Richard, but you must feel no pressure."

"Oh... I don't. Really."

"Well... if you do make it to Church on Sunday, I was thinking..."

"Yes?"

"I've noticed you always sit at the back. But it would look so much better if you came to the front, especially being the R.E. Coordinator now. Better if we sat together, presented a united front? We might even shame some of the other members of staff into putting in an appearance now and then."

"Ah... well that's kind of you. I would have joined you, naturally, but I didn't want anyone getting the wrong idea."

"Oh? In what respect?"

"Em... nothing... I just thought... nothing..."

She's puzzled. Whatever can the silly man mean? She widens her search of possibilities, apparently into the realms of the absurd before she's able to hit upon it, and then she smiles – almost laughs even. "Well, I know there's nothing like a church for being a hotbed of gossip, but I think it's unlikely anyone would ever think *that*, Richard."

Wouldn't they? Is it so ridiculous? *Or are you saying Davinia, it's you who would never think of it?*

I nod in uneasy agreement. "Well... if it's all right with you..."

"It makes sense."

What a pathetic picture I must present. I am what? Ten years older than she? It's not that much beyond the bounds of possibility, surely? Or does she think me so very much older? Does she think me an *old* man? Or is it that I am always so dishevelled? The jacket I wear to school is very much past its best, the collar creased from hanging it over my chair and constantly squashing it as I sit back, the pockets crammed with all manner of items which have, over time pulled it out of shape. My trousers too, always seem more creased than the trousers of other men and the knees are shiny and

I wear rather ordinary Y-fronts when all the evidence in the shops suggests other men eschew them for something rather more in the line of masculine lingerie. I even worry that I might give off some sort of tired odour.

When she's gone, I retrieve what I consider to be my Sunday best: a dark blue double breasted suit. I'd thought it rather a good one, but when I think back, I bought it a long time ago and it's rather unfashionable now. I'm not a rich man, but I'm not short of money either. I spend nothing and live like a hermit, so I do not need to present this shabby image to the world. I can *do* something about it. And why not? I am a *man*! I can split the heads of bigger men than me. A feeling swells inside of me, and my desire for Davinia takes a new and unexpected turn.

So... the following Sunday, I enter the quiet reverence of Marsden Parish Church with a boldness in my step. A Bach cantata is playing, rather poorly I have to say, yet still I pretend to myself I have the intellect to appreciate it. I am wearing all new attire: a modern quality suit, a quality shirt with French cuffs, silk tie, gold watch, cuff links and new polished shoes. I am also wearing a pair of fitted briefs which squeeze my buttocks and are slightly padded at the front, like a bra, so they hold my genitals up in such a way as to constantly make me think I am a sex-god. And yesterday I visited the high class salon in Middleton for a ridiculously expensive haircut and a hot-shave.

I am transformed!

I place my hand on the end of the pew and have the satisfaction of seeing Davinia, so cool and so perfect, look up at me and be lost for words, because at first she does not recognise me. Then she blushes, moves up a little, and sits quietly, lips parted as if to speak, but the words have flown. I bend my head at once in prayer – this is not an Anglican thing, but I tell her later I was brought up a Methodist, where it is the norm on entering the house of God. It gives me a moment of quiet, and also excuses me from having to say anything to her right away.

When I've finished she is still too uncertain of herself to speak, so I pick up the hymn book, check the numbers from the board and steel myself, for they are all in excess of six verses, and I shall have to sing them like a man possessed of the holy spirit, instead of quietly mouthing them like I used to do before. This is a new me, probably unsustainable, but for now I *have* made an impression –

not just on Davinia, but on others in the congregation, unused to seeing the rather dowdy Richard Hunter make so bold. And Davinia is quite wrong about the gossip. From the corner of my eye, I recognise a pair of mothers – one who believes me incontinent, the other is mother to the scissor fiend. They glance and nudge and raise their eyebrows and seem to have wasted little time in asking themselves the question: "Is there something going on between those two?"

I smile that anyone should make the association, but it's not escaped me that it's also quite possibly a disaster. Not the gossip, which I shall enjoy encouraging, but more the lie that has given rise to it. I had wanted only to heal myself, these past weeks, and right now I do feel supernaturally transformed, but have only succeeded in tearing myself in two. Rather than ending the lie, I have embraced it and am now aspiring towards a goal I know is neither likely, nor proper. Desiring Davinia is one thing – knowing what to do with her when I've had my way, is really quite another.

It's as well, I'm thinking, this is something I shall never need to worry about.

Chapter 13

The Reverend David Whitman is an angelic, wrinkled septuagenarian with a soft voice and a delightful sympathy about him. I do not share his beliefs in the nature of God, but were I about to breathe my last, his company at my bedside would not be unappreciated. I have listened to his sermons many times and though his delivery is often rambling and soporific, I admire the trouble he takes in the writing of these spiritual parables, delivered on demand, every week, and without fail.

Such a thing must be very draining for him, so I do try to pay attention. And one does not need to be particularly religious to gain something from a sermon. There is often the whole of philosophy and several yards of highbrow literature in them. This morning though I regret to say I lend him only half an ear, while contemplating the eight inches of electric air between my thigh and Davinia's.

She is wearing a fitted dress of bottle green, square cut around the neck, knee length, and a matching jacket, nipped at the waist. She is wearing pale stockings - I imagine they *must* be stockings – either hold-ups or suspenders, though I cannot know for sure of course, and only reject tights on principle as being the most revolting things invented, and which someone as fussily perfect as Davinia would surely have no time for. There can only be a thin layer of cotton or silk or lace, you see, between her divine sex and the air I breathe. From the corner of my eye I observe the curve of her leg, the strap of her shoe, and the intriguing décolletage of her toes. And I wonder if she thinks of me.

The sermon is about greed. I am aware of course that a thing called sub-prime lending in America has brought ruin to the Western world. None of this concerns me in the slightest however. Banks have collapsed, but my modest savings are in old fashioned accounts, not tied up in investments, and my government has hastened to reassure me it will guarantee them. For me then the only tangible evidence of the turmoil is that after a hundred years of trading, the Woolworth store in Middleton, where, as a teenager, I used to buy my long player records and my novels, has closed, and has still to be re-let.

The sub-prime thing, so far as I understand it, boils down to a

system of loaning money to people who have not the means to ever repay it. This unpayable debt is then bartered and sold on the world's stock-markets under so many disguises no one really knows what they are buying any more. But people bought and sold because the thought of making even a dollar's profit at some future time, made them happy, made them think they were ahead of the game.

The vicar encapsulates the immorality and the insanity of our times with a mixture of themes taken from The Sermon on the Mount and the Emperor's New Clothes – Christ and Christian Andersen. He does not mention Lao Tzu, who I remember saying there is no calamity greater than lavish desire, no greater guilt than discontentment, no disaster greater than greed.

In California, I once sat in meditation, in an orange grove for twelve hours, so stillness is not a problem for me. You must rethink your preconceptions of the nervously inclined. Addressing the nature of our selves takes us into places deeper than are largely known, which all boils down to the fact that no sooner has the service begun, than it is over and I am pressing the palm of the Reverend Whitman, by the door as I leave. The bells are ringing a random melody. They sing the same incoherent song of Sabbaths long ago: Sunday school and the mad, incomprehensible world beyond Marsden's dull red-brick environs. I had thought then the world would grow simpler as I grew older, and am glad the truth was concealed from me.

"Glad to see you, Mr Hunter."

"Richard, please."

It is an act, this pressing of the palms, a ritual politeness. Mrs. Busybody is behind me, the glad smile of an actress, even the hint of a curtsey in her poise as she almost elbows me aside, pantomime fashion, that she might take her turn and bathe in God's glory, and impress Him with her purity of mind – for there is none more worthy, nor so free of sin as she. You have all met Mrs. Busybody. She is a parent governor, the pillar and narcissistic bully of many a church committee... and Davinia hates her guts.

Mindful of Mrs Busybody, Davinia escapes the hand of the good reverend. But she often does this. This ice maiden has no need for the touch of God, so long as His representative has registered her presence, and put a tick against her name. This way her professional duty is done, while her soul can escape untarnished to

some other place she calls home.

I had thought to outpace her, to make a head start for home, because I've observed I stand a better chance of her picking me up that way – that she does not like to offer me a ride within earshot of the godly. But today she catches up with me by the gate.

"Richard?"

"Davinia."

"You sing really well. I'd no idea."

"Thank you. You also sing well."

"No."

But she does. She sings rather sweetly.

"You're looking much better today."

"Thank you. I feel better."

"Did you... I mean, what did you... think of the sermon?"

"Very apt, I suppose – for the times we live in."

"Yes... quite."

Such platitudes! Davinia this is not you. What did I think of the sermon? How nineteenth century! Go away. Ignore me. Be your normal cold, cruel self. Do not befriend me. Do not make yourself a fool for me. I could not bear it.

She smiles. She has dimples! I had not noticed before, but then I so rarely see her smile. "Well," she says, "I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"Yes, I'll be there."

"It'll be lovely to have you back."

This is all spoken politely, professionally. She does not mean it *personally*. Personally, she could hardly care less.

So... tomorrow. I am calm and collected in Harris Tweed, and a genuine English shirt, so rare these days it cost me dear, but feels like a million dollars against my skin. Chinos and Brown Oxfords add to the smart, country man look, as does the brand new gold Omega, and the understated gold rope-work cuff links. I am an expression of muted style, culled directly from the pages of the glossy gents' magazine I perused for hints. Only Davinia's regulation clip-on tie ruins the ensemble, but I wear it proudly now, as if it were my lady's token.

In the six weeks of my absence the children have progressed not a jot. They are also unsettled, noisy and wild, and I can only imagine the bedlam of the lessons endured by the string of woe-faced supply-teachers Davinia has hired at great expense to cover

my sickness. But this cannot concern me now. Instead, I submit to the trial, and discover I am well again.

Friday now; staff meeting.

Lesson plans are still coming in late. Miss Vincent, year one, has been caught out too freely "cutting and pasting" in her submissions. We all do this. Davinia has a Master's Degree from Durham University, is piercingly intelligent, so she knows it too, has done it herself, but Davinia cannot be seen to approve. The secret is to be subtle, though Davinia cannot say so. She can only express her disapproval. Miss Vincent hangs her head in deference, and seethes within.

Davinia wears a severe black trouser suit, with a white mannish shirt and diagonal striped tie. It crosses my mind at this point she might be a lesbian, but then I think she is apparently so unconscious of her sex, she might be of any persuasion and would not know, because this is a side of herself she has quite possibly never explored. There *are* people like this, I tell myself, people who *never* think of sex, just as there are people like me who think about it all the time.

The meeting breaks up, and once again I try not to linger, but to get ahead of her and increase my chances of intimacy with a private ride home, later on. She calls me back. This does not go unnoticed among the others. I see a spiteful Miss Vincent exchange meaningful glances with Miss Gray, of year two. More rumour and gossip in the making, I suppose.

"Davinia?"

"Close the door, Richard."

The door is closed, ever so gently, and I turn to find her blushing.

"So... how was your week? Managing all right?"

"Yes, it went well."

"Good. Sit. Listen, I think you were right about one or two of the children in your class. Maisy Platt, Robert Guyson, Mandy Becket..."

"Ah yes... the usual suspects I'm afraid."

"I've spoken to County. The psychologist will be in on Monday to make an assessment."

"I see..."

She's had complaints, I'm thinking – tearful supply teachers, the agency struggling to place anyone more than once, and the clincher

would have been when, in desperation, she tried to teach the little bastards herself.

"I need to make a report for when he comes in – so I'd be grateful if you could jot down some notes, mail them to me this evening?"

You can have no free time this evening, she's saying. No meditative walk through Durleston Wood. But I've been shy of the place for a while now, so this will not be a problem.

"Yes, of course, Davinia."

"You feel up to another week at the chalk face then?" Her lips tighten – is she trying to smile, I wonder? The dimples do not quite materialise.

"Yes. I'm terribly sorry to have let you down – you know – these past weeks? But I feel very much back on form now. To be honest I think... well,..."

"Yes?"

"It wasn't the job, you know? Oh, I think we both know I'm not the world's best teacher. I came to it a little late to be really any good at it, but I do enjoy it. It's more that I've not felt myself since coming back to England. Things were still catching up with me."

Not all of this is a lie, and indeed quite possibly nearer to the truth than it feels as I'm saying it. She's not sure of my meaning, not sure she wants to know because it sounds like there might be some emotional content, but on this occasion curiosity gets the better of her and she humours me with her attention.

"Oh?"

I note however she does not hasten to contradict me concerning my low opinion of myself as a teacher.

"Well..." I begin. "You know? Separation, estrangement. Everything that happened in America. My whole life was there, and I feel very much a stranger here – even though it's where I grew up. It feels so odd being back." I soften all of this with a smile, and the hint of a stiff, upper lip: *I'm bearing up, Davinia. You can trust me, rely on me*.

"Of course, I understand." She has the facts of the matter, does not want me to dwell any more upon it. Then she sighs, thinks twice about something, then a third time. "I'm separated too, you know? You were married for much longer than me though, I think?"

"Fifteen years."

"Yes, five for me. It takes its toll, Richard. You must be patient."

I'm beginning to feel uncomfortable with this confession. Don't do it Davinia. Don't open up to me. I need you to be frosty, lofty and distant. I need to feel your disdain and sense the hopelessness of my infatuation for you. Do not become *human*.

"Yes... quite. Well, is that everything?"

"No," she says. "There was one other thing."

"Oh?"

"Your tie."

"My tie?"

"That clip-on I gave you. It looks ridiculous. I don't know what I was thinking. Get rid of it. Wear... whatever you think is best. You obviously have good taste, when you put your mind to it."

"Thank you." This is a back-handed compliment, but better than none!

"Have a pleasant weekend, Richard."

"I shall. You, too."

She does not even pretend to smile this time, and I suspect there will be no pleasure for Davinia – that in Davinia's world pleasure is seen as a waste of time. But she is *not* lesbian. She has been married – is still, like me. And like me, it is a loose end that requires tidying, but to deal with, it will take us back to the source, and we'd really rather not bother. We have this in common at least. But she has loved a man! Might she not then be capable of loving another?

11:08 pm :Sender:

richard.hunter@darkstar.net

Recipient: davinia.barkwell@*****.edu.com

Davinia, notes attached. Best regards Richard

Translation: I am keen, capable and professional in carrying out your bidding Mistress. Look at the time I sent this!

11:12 pm: Sender: davinia.barkwell@*****.edu.com

Recipient: richard.hunter@darkstar.net

Thank you Richard. Not partying tonight then? Davinia.

11:14 pm: Not partying. Too old.

Translation: *Surprise - do you wish to speak of personal things, Mistress? I fear I am getting too old for life, for love, for you. Tell me I am not too old, that I am worthy, of life, worthy of you.*

11:15: Too old? Or no one to go with?

11:17 :)

Translation: *Do you mock me Mistress, or do you ask the question to see if I am free? Smiling emoticon - I don't know what to say so I*

knock the ball back into your side of the court, that I might judge by its return how to proceed.

11:18 :(

Translation: *Frowning emoticon - alarm! Have I offended you, Mistress, or are you reflecting my smile with your sadness? Are you sad Mistress? Querying frowny emoticon. Why sad, Mistress?*

11:19 :(?

11:20: Good night, Mr Hunter.

Possible translation: *You are dismissed. That will be all.*

11:21: Goodnight, Miss Barkwell.

What is she wearing as we exchange these lines? Still the grey suit? Has she taken off the jacket, the tie? Has she loosened the buttons of her shirt? Is there an inch or two of bra showing? Is it white? Or dark? Or is she in bed, wearing silk pyjamas, with only her laptop for company, like me? *No, I am not wearing silk pyjamas.* And the emoticon? She frowns at my smile. Is this truly a hint that there may be things she would like to confide in me? And when I query it, she closes formally. Is that guilt at the sense of her own growing weakness?

Chapter 14

I sleep late, laptop folded under the opposite pillow because it contains a message and an enigma from my Lady. She frowned. She intimated sadness. Perhaps as she wrote she sat with a bottle of wine, half consumed and her defences duly lowered. She invited me into a deeper knowledge of her which I accepted, but the stronger, more steely part of her won out and rejected me. I had thought to dream of her, but she eludes me even in this respect and I awaken now with the peculiar emptiness I know can only be filled by something that does not exist.

My house has a small patch of lawn to the rear. By the good grace of overgrown Leylandii on both sides, not a corner of it is overlooked, and I have already told you how it backs onto a meadow. I feel justified therefore in keeping it neat, as a useful private space, out of doors, albeit somewhat cool and mossy, and shady on account of the same Leylandii. There is a plastic table and chairs, bird-pooped and lichen-stained, standing upon a plain patio, and there is a rickety, rotting shed sagging against the far fence. When I raise myself from bed and open the curtains on the garden, I note the shed-door is open. I think nothing of this, only make a mental note to close it later on. Then I shuffle downstairs to the kitchen, reach out to switch on the kettle... and recoil.

Lillian is sitting on the floor, looking up at me.

"Shit!"

"Hello, Adam."

She's hugging her knees like a frightened child, her back against the wall. She's wearing blue jeans that are too big for her, and a sweater that is too tight. Her left eye is swollen, purple-bruised and almost shut.

"Lillian!"

"May I use your bathroom, please?"

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

I'm not angry, but the sight of her has disturbed me. It's not so much her intrusion into my private space, but the persistent fact of her presence when I am so reluctant to involve myself with her at all.

"I'm sorry. I needed..." she's struggling to say what it is she needs but settles on: "company."

"What?"

"But just now I really need to use your bathroom."

"Oh... of course. It's up the stairs, facing. Your eye's a terrible mess. Did he do that?"

She nods, then slips silently away to the bathroom, returning some minutes later to find me brewing coffee. Her good eye is lowered, subdued, embarrassed by her need.

"You seem different," she tells me. She's at pains to keep the restraints hidden I note, tugging her sleeves down and lifting the neck of her sweater as she speaks to me.

"I've had my hair cut."

"Yes, so I see – but that's not what I mean. Has something happened?" She sits down at the table, takes up the mug I offer, then she looks at me more closely. She cannot know of the sudden change in me from cringing wreck to shallow dandy.

She's guessing.

"How... how did you find me?"

She tells me she followed me, once, weeks ago, took the risk of entering what she calls the made-up world in order to satisfy her curiosity about me. It was dusky, she held back in the shadows, and I was too self absorbed to notice her. She identified my house as opening out onto a particular meadow that she felt sure she could reach directly from the woods. The house was easily recognisable from the Durleston side, as being situated next door to a house with a distinctive satellite dish on the roof.

She claims to have had no aims in this, other than to pinpoint me at the periphery of her world, but I don't believe her. Now she's hurt and more afraid than usual, more aware of the precariousness of her existence, and her need of a friend. So she steals under cover of darkness, out of the wood, across the various hedgerows and ditches, into the meadow, then lifts up a fence panel, slides through, and thinks to spend the night in my shed, rather than awaken me. Then she discovers the spare key, and it's cold. So she lets herself in.

I have not thought of this connection before – my back garden with the depths of Durleston. The meadow is under the stewardship of a farmer who permits no access. His grumpy, hand-painted notices warn of dire consequences. Domestic dogs have been shot for straying onto his patch and there's not a damned thing the distraught owners can do. The people of Marsden do not look at this

meadow and see a way through to the woods. They see an invisible wall, psychologically impenetrable. But the view is green and open, and adds value to their property, which is all that really matters.

"I'm worried about my eye," she says "Will you look at it for me?"

"I'm not a doctor."

"I know, but you're all I have. So, please?"

I look at her eye. There is bruising, obviously, and much swelling, but she tells me it was worse before so I'm thinking it will heal of its own accord. It's probably too late to be of any use now, but I wrap a bag of frozen peas in a tea towel, and tell her to hold it against her face. A doctor is out of the question of course, not that my GP would be of much help anyway.

"Does he do this a lot? You told me he was not a cruel man, that he would not hurt you."

"Something upset him. One night a few weeks ago he came in bruised and wild... it started then."

"Ah... that might have something to do with me."

She nods. "I know. I saw it."

"Then you know he gave me no choice. He would have hurt me if I'd not defended myself."

Again she nods. "Yes... he would. I was afraid for you that night."

"So, you see?..."

"It's all right, Adam, I am not saying this is your fault."

But it is. All actions have their consequences. That final blow hurt him, rendered him senseless, but worse than that it robbed him of his dignity. I'd known right away there would be a price to pay. It's just that it's Lillian, not me, who has ended up paying it.

"When did you last see him?"

"Four days ago. There's no food at all in the house. I don't know what he expects me to do. How I'm supposed to live. He brings so little with him – less each time, like he thinks I can live off air. He says I'm getting fat and could do with eating less."

How much of this is true? How much is aimed at winning my sympathy? She's looking thin and drawn, but this could be self inflicted. It could be a mixture of worry and living like a pauper, this gauntness. It cannot be that she's actually being starved. But what if she is? I've not been through the woods for a while, not left her anything, never thought for a moment she actually relied on

such tokens.

"You can't go on like this, Lillian."

She hangs her head. "I know."

I think of telling her I was coming for her that night, but it seems imprudent now and I hold my tongue. I open the refrigerator instead, crack open some eggs and begin to make an omelette, adding cheese, tomatoes, butter, anything I can think of that might fill her up.

"He's not right in the head," I tell her, "He'll end up killing you – anyone who can treat a human being like that's..."

Suddenly she's beside me. I can smell wood-smoke on her clothes, on her hair. She takes the whisk from me, her hands brushing my fingers so that I flinch away in surprise. She tells me I'm doing it all wrong and while I sit at the table, she stands at the stove, probably weak with hunger, folding an omelette beautifully. She divides it into two, and lays the halves on plates with a peculiar symbolism. I had intended the whole for her, but she tells me she will not eat unless I eat too.

I know her man is some sort of criminal. What kind of criminal, I'd rather not imagine – drug dealer, mobster, bank robber, trafficker of misery – all are marked with the same dark stain, and none of it alters the fact that this is England, early in the twenty first century, and there is a sex slave sitting in my kitchen. Would this have been possible twenty years ago?

She slipped just once from a secure hold on a respectable life, and fell, not into the arms of a broad shouldered and broad minded society, but straight through the cracks, into the depths of hell, where there dwell only demons who have branded her, and pressed her into the servicing of their vile needs. How can this be? How can I be looking at a lost soul, a non-person in these enlightened times? Have we lurched so far into bigotry, hypocrisy and corruption that we can be blind to the suffering that goes on under our very noses?

Oh, shut up Richard. What are you doing about it anyway?

"You have to get away from him, Lillian."

"You say that, yet you will not help me. "

"I'm helping you now, aren't I?"

"A cup of coffee, a bag of frozen peas, a hot meal? I am grateful for all of this, Adam, really, truly, but it is the kindness of a stranger, and you are no longer a stranger to me. I can expect more from you, I think."

My patience wears thin of a sudden as my ego inflates in self defence. She can expect nothing! I've asked *nothing* of her. I want *nothing* from her. What right has she to say such a thing to me? "That's not fair... I could be arrested for helping you... or murdered for all I know."

"Both of those things are possible, I suppose. I know you're afraid."

"Afraid? Yes... and so are you. You're afraid to be with him, but also afraid to be without him or at least without *someone*. You have the power to set *yourself* free, but instead you seem to be looking for a different kind of service, a different kind of bondage."

"It's true, I would like to serve you, Adam."

"But I don't need anyone, Lillian – least of all a... a..."

"Whore?"

"Slave... submissive... whatever the word is.... It's not my scene. I wouldn't know what to do with you."

"You need someone like me. You're just afraid to admit it."

"How can you say that? You don't know me."

"I've watched you. I know how ill you are. You drink boiled herbs to calm the fire in your head because you don't trust the chemicals the doctor gives you. The fire makes you dizzy, makes you angry. You have so much energy Adam, but it has no focus, no direction. It should bring you satisfaction, drive, ambition, but instead it brings you frustration and the grey mist of a terrible depression. Tell me I'm wrong in what I say."

My hesitation is confirmation enough.

"I can heal you," she goes on. "It's so much simpler than anything you think it might be."

"I doubt that."

"Is there someone in your life, perhaps? A woman?"

"Actually... there is. Yes."

I am thinking only to deflect her, and she does take a moment over this revelation, but then goes on in as matter of fact a tone as before: "I wondered if you might," she says, and then, with sage-like confidence: "You should forget her for now. She can't help you."

I'm amused by this. "How can you possibly know that?"

"Because anyone can see the way you are, which means she's either blind to it and unable to help, unwilling to help, or she is part of the problem."

"This is ridiculous..."

"Does she even know you exist, Adam?"

I cannot reply. I'm stung by her insights.

She looks away. "I'm sorry. I've said too much."

"I think you have, yes."

"I should go then?"

"No... you... can't go yet."

"Oh?"

"You'll be seen. You'll have to wait until after nightfall."

"Yes. I'll wait. I won't say anything more to upset you. I promise."

Silence. What are we going to do now? There's a whole day to kill. I must get away from her! I must think, but she's in my house and cannot leave it! How can she know these things about me? How can she see inside my head?

I tell her: "Don't worry about upsetting me."

"Really?"

"A man needs someone to point out his foolishness – preferably someone he doesn't mind doing it."

"Are you saying you would like me to be that person?"

Hmm... too much of a forward step. Too much of a declaration. But I *would*, yes, though I cannot tell her that now. It isn't that I trust her. She's in too desperate a fix, and anything she says I have to filter for signs of her manipulating me. "What... were you?" I ask. "I mean... before?"

"My job? Does it matter?"

"Possibly – it might help me to understand you."

"They called it a research assistant. I worked for a magazine. I sat in front of a computer all day, like everyone else. It was certainly not worth such an expensive education. You wondered perhaps if I was a psychologist or a counsellor... or a witch?" She smiles. "I see around corners sometimes. That's all. But they do not teach such things at universities. Tell me, have you lived here long?"

"No."

"I thought not. It's too bare."

"I've been abroad for a long time. I've not managed to acquire much yet."

"It's so much more modern than where I live."

"I suppose it must be."

"But still, it does not suit you here, I think."

"Nowhere does. I don't fit in anywhere these days."

"I know somewhere you would fit in very well."

"Oh?"

"I've seen the way you look at the place as you pass by – at its overgrown neglect. And you are thinking how you would like to put it all back in order. It calls to you Adam. Say it isn't so."

"I've thought it could be improved, I suppose."

"Yes, yes... it could be made very pretty, with white painted fences and clipped lawns and roses around the door?"

It's impossible to tell when she's serious about something or just toying with me. "What are you saying then? That you think I should come and live with you?"

She gives a little shrug. "Of course not, that would be impossible. But why don't you call? I invited you, remember? You could come, and I could show you the house. Where the garden runs down to the river... and you could imagine how much nicer it would be if it were yours, if you were in control of it, how much better it would be, if you were in control... of me."

Durleston Cottage! It's like something untidy in my past, something I would have liked to put in order, to neaten up, to bottom out. But Lillian's another thing altogether. Or is she? Are they not one and the same? I don't mean *this* Lillian – I mean the other – you know?

"I couldn't control you, Lillian. Like I said – that's not my scene."

"I could teach you."

"Well, thanks all the same, but... I prefer a woman who knows her own mind, who makes her own way."

"Hmm... like your girlfriend, perhaps? I could pretend to know my own mind for you, pretend to be... confident, forthright... is that how she is?"

"Look, this all sounds very pleasant, but... even just visiting the house... it wouldn't be a good idea, would it?"

"You mean if he were to show up?"

"Exactly."

"That would spoil things, yes. But he only comes at dusk – or later. It would be perfectly safe if you came in the day and left well before sunset."

I understand we're playing now, that none of this is real. We are just pretending.

"And I should think he is afraid of you," she says.

"I doubt that. Next time he'll be ready. If I defend myself with a stick, he'll use a knife. If I use a knife, he'll bring a gun. That's how it is with people like that."

"You make it sound so romantic, Adam: that we might share some precious moments, but only at the certain cost of being discovered and murdered for it."

"It's not funny."

"You exaggerate. He *is* afraid of you. We fear the snake for its reputation, but most likely it would rather avoid us than be seen – and it will only bite when we give it no choice."

I smile. "That's very poetic. But it seems to me he's bitten you already. We wouldn't last five minutes. At the very least, if you displeased him, he would betray you to the authorities."

"Does it matter? Would you rather spend your whole life with someone, feeling nothing for them? Or worse, desiring someone from afar and wallowing in hopelessness for years and years? Or would you exchange all of that for just five minutes with someone, if you knew in that time you might realise with them the perfect moment?"

"The perfect moment? There's no such thing. We can't go around chasing every whim like that."

"It's not a whim, Adam. I know such things might seem dangerously imprudent to such a careful and sensible man as you, but really, we owe it to ourselves to seek that moment when we have so clearly been given permission."

She speaks sometimes like a sage, at other times like a child, as if embarrassed by her thoughts. Now she tugs at her sleeves and wrinkles her nose. Playtime is over.

"My clothes stink." She gives a wry smile. "They belong to the Bitch. It's what he calls me: Bitch. Lillian does not suit such clothes. Have you a shirt I could borrow, please? I am embarrassed to wear these shabby things in your presence."

"I can lend you a shirt, yes, or I have a dressing gown, but look... Lillian, I don't want..."

"It's all right. I'm not flirting with you – taking my clothes off, I do not mean to arouse you. I'm too tired. I haven't slept for days, haven't slept properly for months. I can pretend desire only when I imagine my life depends upon it. I cannot pretend it with you. You do not threaten me, you see? If I were ever to desire you, I would mean it... and you would know it."

She's such a lovely creature, lost, lonely, gentle, and she does not deserve to be treated this way. But she is also wily. I do not threaten her. She tells me this only so I might be lured closer. "Why don't you have a bath while you're here," I suggest. "Wash your hair. Have a good soak, take your time. It's all right... really. Then why not sleep?"

She nods. Her face suddenly congested with an emotion she dare not express. This means something to her. I have touched her, and I did not expect to. I thought her too hardened by life for that.

"Thank you, Adam. I will."

I hear the bathwater running, and knock on the door. She opens it a crack, and her hand snakes around to take the dressing gown. In that instant I see the cheap jeans and the sweater tossed upon the floor, along with a pair of big, matronly panties – surprising for being so unflattering. She's naked behind the door, then. She says nothing, and is ashamed to show me more than is necessary. It is not her body she's afraid to let me see, but the chains. She is mortified by them, but what more can I do than this?

It's simple: I can ask her to stay; I can tell her not to go back to Durleston, that he will think she's run away and simply forget she's ever existed. She won't be free, but at least she'll be safe, for a while. With me.

Tug my hair Adam? It's my birthday.

Yes Lillian.

And we all know what happened then, don't we?

Chapter 15

The day is wet, and a cold wind cuts through the Leylandii outside my back door. Their tops sway sullenly. They are not happy trees, Leylandii, always too many, too close, not enough space to spread and realise their nature. By contrast I imagine the same wind cutting through Durleston. I can hear it stirring the leaves and raising a joyous roar.

She has a coat and a pair of flimsy deck shoes that she's set neatly by the door. They are soaked through, so I arrange them on a chair by the gas fire in the front room and try to dry them for her, though if this weather keeps up, they'll be soaked through again before she's returned even half way across the meadow.

I have only the one bed, and do not mind her sleeping in it, though it gives me an odd feeling to think of her curled up there. I do not find it erotic. I am not aroused by the thought of her sleeping there. It's more the intimacy of her presence, lying quiet and calm and trusting, in my bed.

It disturbs me.

I haven't changed the sheets for a while and I've told her so, but she is grateful, she tells me, for the chance to sleep while someone watches over her. This is not true, but simply another way of lowering my defences, of making me want to discover that perfect moment with her.

I think about it now, what she said:

We owe it to ourselves to seek that moment when we have so clearly been given permission.

A belief in the supernatural runs through most of us. It's the only thing that gets us through our lives, this belief that although our lives seem pointless, there *is* a meaning to them, a purpose – that it's all not simply random. A smart and rational kind of person will scoff and call such an outlook pre-rational, harking back to some primitive era of human evolution. But rationalism is dying. It explains things very well but I know it also makes people ill and that it has largely succeeded only in destroying the world we live in. Lillian's sentiments transcend the rational. They are modern. They are trans-rational. She is educated *and* superstitious and she would be unflinchingly honest about it, if I were to unleash her into the world.

I share her mysticism, but I also fear it. It comes down to the question of what it is we think we are for. The Reverend Whitman would say our purpose is to seek redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ, but I don't know what that means – indeed, I'm even less sure now than I was when I first heard this explanation forty years ago.

The couple next door surely think our purpose is to have as much sex as possible before we die, but beyond that they probably don't think about it very much at all. Sometimes though we are forced to ask the awkward question regarding our existence, like what difference does it make if I am happy or not? I have sowed my seed, passed on my genes. I am not hungry, do not lack shelter or warmth. So, what is this ache I feel? And why do I think Lillian is right, that I am being given a chance of touching something remarkable, if only I dare release it. Then we would be like butterflies, fluttering in the heat of a summer's day, only to lie crushed and exhausted by nightfall. Is it better to live long in misery and dullness, or to flare up brightly, and truly live for just a day, or even a moment?

It's my intention to leave her alone, to let her sleep, but then I remember the laptop under the pillow and tiptoe up to retrieve it. She has found it and set it upon the bedside table for me. She appears to be sleeping. I've seen her sleeping before and am reminded of the paradox of her arduous circumstances and her look of perfect repose. How old is she? Thirty? Thirty five? Yet looking at her now she's so like a girl, all the tension gone, the skin smooth, the cheeks round. Her mouth is open a little, revealing her upper front teeth which jut slightly in a way that would have an orthodontist's hands rubbing together with glee, but which only add to her sweetness and her girlishness. Her hand is curled up towards her face, thumb outstretched as if in search of her cupid's bow lips. She is so beautiful: a rare, exotic creature, with rare, exotic and exceedingly strange ideas.

But I cannot think like this.

The room is hot with her, and earth scented. I find to my surprise I am imagining making love to her. It is the easiest thing – but the call of Lillian is not the mystique of her body. It's more in the sound of her voice, in her look, and undoubtedly it's also in her tragedy. It is not desire I feel, but an overwhelming compassion. However, just as Davinia cannot bring herself to comfort a weeping

child, I cannot reach out my hand to this lost woman. Davinia has only to finger a button on the sleeve of her blouse and I am aching, yet I cannot imagine, dare not imagine, what she would be like to touch, how she would feel or taste or look.

We would be two cold fish together, then.

Perfect.

Lillian stirs a little and without opening her eyes, she whispers softly: "You can if you want to, you know?"

"What?"

"Slide in beside me."

"No... I wasn't thinking that. I'm sorry to disturb you. I just came for my computer."

"It's all right, *really*." She smiles a little, teasing, playing, her eyes still closed, as if speaking to me from a dream.

"No, Lillian. You're wearing someone else's chains."

"Then cut them off, and make me yours."

"Go to sleep. The days are short. It'll be dark again soon, and then you'll have to go back to Durleston."

See? You'll have to go back. I do not want you.

I retreat downstairs and switch on my laptop, hoping for another message from Davinia, anything to break the spell I feel Lillian is casting over me. There is nothing new, only the exchanges from last night. I am distracted and desperate for a diversion so I type: *Davinia, are you doing anything tonight?* My finger hovers over the send button but I step back from the brink, delete the words and spend the rest of my Saturday in the cheerless gloom of my living room, while the steam rises slowly from Lillian's shoes. The house seems even darker and quieter for her coming, but it will seem all the more empty when she has gone.

I have chicken and rice and spices, so I make a curry for tea, and the smell of cooking draws her down. She looks better, brighter for having slept, though her conscious thoughts have moulded her face once more, tightened it, lured it away from the soft innocence of her dreams. She's wearing her old clothes, ready to depart.

The curry is not good: too dry, and too spicy.

"You are a terrible cook, Adam."

"I know."

Tell her she can stay!

No.

I watch as she cleans her plate, and then, in a moment of self-

reproach, I bid her fill her pockets with whatever she needs. "If you need more, you know where the spare key is. Just let yourself in and take it."

That's it, yes. Let her have the option. If I come home one night to find she's moved in, then I'll take things from there, but don't actually commit yourself right now. I do not understand myself. She does not understand me either and raises an eyebrow in query.

"Oh?"

"You're right. We're no longer strangers." What am I saying? What kind of capitulation is this? I must draw a line though, let her know the boundaries of my compassion. "You need somewhere you can run to. Somewhere to get food from, when yours runs out. But if the authorities catch up with you, I shall deny all knowledge of you. Okay?"

She was hoping for more. I see the light in her eyes dim a little, but she nods and manages a glow of genuine gratitude. "I understand. Thank you."

There is tremor in her voice. I've been too cold, too distant. I've disappointed her. Offer her some more then: "If your eye's no better in a few days, come back to me. I'll see if there's anything else I can do."

But I can do nothing, and she knows it. I'm pathetic. She pulls on her shoes and her thin coat. It has mud on the hem, and a part of me is saying: let her at least stay the night. Don't send her out into the dark and the cold to face the monster. She pauses, her hand on the door. "Will you be happy with her, do you think?" she asks me.

"Who?"

"Your girlfriend."

"Oh... that... well... she's not exactly my girlfriend."

"It's not certain then, between you and her?" Is that curiosity I detect, or a brightening?

"You were right earlier: she doesn't even know my name. Well, I mean, she knows my name, but she's no idea how I feel."

"Then you must either tell her, or forget her, Adam. A thing like that, it will eat you up from the inside and leave you hollow."

"I know."

"Come to me. Release me. I will nourish you. Fill you up. Make you whole again."

She really has no idea. And besides, she's too hot, too dangerous, too real. She would bring about a change, too drastic and

unpredictable.

Tug my hair, Adam.

"Lillian,..."

"I know, I know. I'm going. Help me with the fence?"

It's seven pm, cold and drizzly and a very dark night, and I am sliding up a fence panel, trying not to make a sound. I lift it about three feet, prop it up with a garden spade, then crouch down in the darkness with her, both of us staring out at the blank void beyond, as if through a window on a world forbidden and strange. I can smell the sweetness of the wet meadow. I fancy too I can smell the earth and the leaf-mould of Durleston beyond it.

"You can find your way all right? What if you turn your ankle?"

"I'll be fine Adam."

We have already touched, innocently, as she took the pan from me this morning, but it is enough to embolden her and she gives my shoulder a gentle pat now, as if the ice has been broken and we are already a few more steps along the way towards becoming lovers. Or are we lovers already? I feel a time has already come when we have had that knowledge of each other, a timeless time, a time that wraps past and present into one.

"Good night, Adam."

She's gone.

I watch for as long as her silhouette is perceptible, until she is absorbed back into imagination. Then I retire early, being careful to lie on the opposite side of the bed to where she lay because her presence is still there. But as the night comes on, I find myself rolling into the imagined hollow of her empty space, and lamenting the fact there is a woman who has offered herself to me, and it has been so long since I felt the comfort of a loving touch, a loving warmth. This is dangerous. I can feel things vibrating with an as yet indiscriminate fecundity. If it should seek me out?

No.

Better for me the sterile secret of Davinia.

Chapter 16

It's unusual to see anyone dressed smartly on a Sunday morning these days. The churchgoers, out and about, around 10:00 am, have largely forsaken their pressed shirts and their ties for very casual attire, as if afraid of being set upon by yobs who would jeer at their spick-and-spanness. The school yard bullies have now leaped the fences of Middleton High School, and are at large in the adult world. So, grown men dress like teenagers, they wear ear-studs and tattoos, and trousers that manage to look at the same time ridiculously elaborate yet also slovenly. In my youth, these same people would have been indistinguishable from the gentry, at least for this one day of the week.

There are a few exceptions – the old fashioned church officials, leading members of the community, school governors, scout leaders, Davinia,... and me of course. I'm nervous as I walk Mill Lane. There are people washing cars, using jig-saws, angle-grinders, drills, lawnmowers, strimmers, making all manner of din – and they look at me as I pass, this lone man in a suit with a dark overcoat, red tie, crisp white shirt, and shiny shoes.

No one speaks to me. I feel isolated, disconnected, I feel they judge me, think me strange – these modern incumbents of my past – not because I have narrowly averted a nervous breakdown, nor that I more or less continuously dodge the shadow of depression, nor even that I have given succour to a sex-slave – or worse an illegal immigrant – but merely because of the way I dress.

I resolve to buy a car, and have done with it. It's easier to stare the world in the eyes, from behind the wheel of a monstrous four-by-four. And sod the fact if it only does twelve miles per gallon. I can afford it for the mileage I would do. It might also impress Davinia if I take to driving something big and sleek and shiny. It's settled then!

Today she is wearing a navy blue dress with white trim. Very smart, very nautical. It is cut just above the knee. She has good legs, is youthful, carries herself well, and can get away with it. Her hair shines like something angelic in the rainbow of light that slants through the stained glass windows of Marsden Parish Church.

She was not here in my childhood for me to gaze upon, like this, but I'm glad she's here now. In awe of this vision of

unapproachable loveliness, I nod my greeting, then dip my head in quiet prayer. She has a stern look about her today – lips drawn tight as if fearful of letting slip a confidence. It's those e-mails, I suppose. We teetered too long on the brink of informality and now she is punishing us both.

The flowers on the altar are yellow. I do not know their names but they have a brightness about them, and though I do not understand this place, I find its atmosphere uplifting. I find it armours me against her. But oh, the hymns are wearisome! Still, I shall not falter. We falter only when we lack focus, and I take this hymn singing as a serious challenge now. Davinia however, mixes her words, is not paying attention, sings the last line of the following verse; she is thinking of something else. She falls silent now... distracted, embarrassed.

As for me, I am childishly excited about the prospect of buying a car. How stupid I was to have been intimidated off the road by my own paranoia! How weak! I imagine parking the car by the church, seeing Davinia's face when I step out of it. Oh, how I wish I had it with me today! Then, strangely, I am interrupted by the words of the Reverend Whitman, who is half way through his sermon. He is chastising me it seems, speaking of the waste of living one's life when we are lured into seeing ourselves through the eyes of someone else. We keep up appearances. Everyone in the church is guilty of this – we're doing it now, but the Reverend Whitman's wisdom is falling on deaf ears. The heating is up too high, it's hot, and someone has nodded off.

I focus on the Reverend, but the theme I thought he was developing has slipped away. He's talking of other things now, so I sink inside of myself and try to tickle the original thought back. I look at myself through Davinia's eyes and I wonder if she is pleased by me, by the way I look, the things I say, the way I am when I'm with her. It's wrong to do this of course because I abandon my own vision of the world for an imagined view, when it is my own view that's the important thing, the *essential* thing, the one and only thing I was born for.

Our self importance is assured by the very reason of our birth, yet we spend the rest of or lives shirking our responsibilities and hiding behind this cloak of appearances. It is God who looks through my eyes. This is my authentic self. God requires only this of me, otherwise I am of no use. I do not know what knowledge

God can possibly glean through the tangled mess of my life, but that is not for me to worry about. It is for me only to present the vision through the filter of my authentic self. Yet here I sit, an actor in a play, Davinia my audience, my critic, my twisted muse.

I know what I must do, but I cannot.

After the service, I nod my farewell and turn to go. The awkward run of my thoughts have left me feeling jittery and hot. I fear a relapse. It's inevitable, I suppose, but I did not expect it to happen so soon.

"Wait a moment, Richard. I need to speak with you."

I'm caught, heart fluttering at nothing, wondering what she has to say to me, but she raises her finger and puts me on hold, then turns to her other side and engages the chair of governors – a crusty old curmudgeon who delights in her presence. So I wait, trying not to eavesdrop. They talk about diary dates, meetings, advisers, possible inspections – a long tangled garble of jargon and teacher-speak that I suppose I am a party to these days but which I find none the less unintelligible and indescribably dull. But more, I am jealous to be kept waiting while she deals so animatedly with him.

She never speaks to me like that – so naturally – dare I say even a little flirtatiously. Is she being false with him? I would say so, but it's not because she's being false to herself, presenting the face she thinks he wants to see. No. She knows exactly what she's doing and chooses her masks very carefully. She is very calculating, possibly soulless, but she sees herself through no one else's eyes but her own. Davinia is her authentic self, therefore how can God be anything other than pleased with her?

I stand in the aisle, to see if it will distract her. It's one thing to be seen sitting together during the service, quite another for me to appear to be waiting for her like this. She's unmoved, however. It's hard not to fidget, to fiddle with my keys, my loose change, to look awkward and stupid. She is dismantling me piece by piece. I take a breath, tell myself to stand stock still and am eventually rescued by Mrs Busybody.

"Mr Hunter. I'm so glad you're feeling better."

What does she mean by this?

"Amanda seems much happier this week, now you're back."

Amanda? Ah... the troublesome little Miss Becket, shortly to be assessed for her mental stability. I'm forgetting Mrs Busybody is her grandmother, and there is a stigma to be avoided here. But what

can I say? Fortunately, Davinia rescues me from Mrs Busybody who seems to feel the chill of her shadow. They exchange glances, and sharp smiles. Then I walk out with Davinia.

"Richard, will you have lunch with me?"

What?

"Em... of course. I would be delighted."

My reply is as flat and matter of fact as was her invitation, and it's only as we approach her car I begin to feel something. It's a burning in my stomach, not entirely pleasant. There is a warning in it. I mean, how can I possibly have lunch with Davinia Barkwell?

"We should travel out a bit," she advises.

"Yes, that's probably wise."

"Any ideas?"

She's asking me? "I don't want to put you to any inconvenience, Davinia. Wherever we go, you'll have to bring me back."

"It's no problem. Southport then?"

She's standing by the car now, The Duke of York hotel on speed-dial, lifting her i-Phone to her ear and booking a table. Mrs Busybody is passing. I'm sure she's raising her eyebrows and scowling in horror, but then she always looks like this, so it's hard to tell. Has Davinia done it on purpose? I look at us. In any other profession we would be held safely above the gutter; a man and a woman, well dressed – the woman with a 'phone to her ear, her free hand on the roof of her vehicle, fingers spread, slender and ringless, long nails painted red. We are professionals, working on Sunday, maintaining an image. But we are also teachers, which makes us public property. The last examination Mrs Busybody sat was her eleven plus, yet she owns us, and she and her kind waste never an opportunity to let us know. But that's it with public property – like libraries and bus-shelters, they always end up covered in a slime of ignorance and abuse.

"You should be more careful, Davinia."

We are driving now and Davinia is smiling, a very feline sort of smile. "Oh?"

"Mrs Busybody – I'm sure she overheard you just now."

"Mrs Busybody?"

"Griselda Munchkin then – I forget her real name. My memory's not what it was."

"You should speak more respectfully of parents and governors."

"I shall, as soon as they begin speaking more respectfully of us."

"Did you have a late night last night? You sound grumpy. Anyway, as to the table booking, it didn't exactly mean you were the other party."

"Logically speaking, I suppose not. But such pedantry is for mathematicians and I can assure you it will be assumed."

"You needn't worry about – what did you call her? Griselda?"

"She has a powerful voice among the governors – I remember her at my interview. She was prickly and rude. I doubt she was much in favour of taking me on."

"Oh, she wasn't. In fact, the only reason you got the job was because she was against it. Otherwise I wouldn't have been so articulate in speaking up for you. No, you seemed quite dull and lacklustre to me as well. It was only her dislike of you that made me abandon my reservations."

"Thanks." I realise the insult too late, then feel stupid.

"She's a bossy woman, Richard. Bossiness is the result of thwarted ambition. She can go no further than governorship of a small village school. She's nothing. Forget her."

But we are all nothing, I'm thinking. And the only mistake some of us make is in believing we are better than nothing. Yet it's so hard to believe there can be found happiness in nothing.

It's a half hour drive to the coast. In minutes, we have left behind the black stained red brick of Marsden and are cruising the A roads through the bare flat fields of the Lancashire plain. The sky dominates, pale grey but with a uniform and uninteresting brightness in it that hurts the eyes. The land is compressed, dull, and ugly in its nakedness. I do not know what I'm doing here with her, and the temptation to make stupid conversation as a distraction is overwhelming, but I think to myself that if she wanted to talk, she would be doing the talking.

Southport is busy, yet alluring in an old-world kind of way. The tree lined boulevard of Lord Street is thick and sluggish with traffic. I would be nervous here behind the wheel of a car these days, and as if on cue a cop-car cruises up behind us. I cringe pathetically in its presence. Davinia, however, eyes it coolly in her mirror, her lip curled a little in contempt at its ambition to intimidate her, but she is otherwise unmoved. I am reminded that I could not do this, that no longer seem to be of this world, and it terrifies me because where else am I supposed to be, if not here?

She pulls onto the carpark of the Duke of York like she's used to

doing it, and I have trouble matching her poise as she sweeps into the lobby. I don't know what to do here, or what to say, so I stand embarrassed and uncertain. Then I catch myself in a long mirror and am surprised by my reflection. I actually look smart and self-assured and I'm reminded of the game I am playing: this worldly man who is looking to make Davinia fall in love with him. How can this be? I should be by the beech tree, my back pressed hard against it, listening to the chatter of the Rye.

I'm forgetting myself:
The world no longer works for me.
My place is to withdraw from it.

There is an Edwardian opulence about the Duke of York, all of it manufactured. So much of Southport these days is edging towards the avant-guarde, the architectural concrete and steel, but it still finds time for echoes of a more traditional past. And here I am, in the oak panelled dining room with its ostentatious drapes, seated at a table with Davinia, overlooking terraced gardens. Lord Street thrums away in the near distance, while a waist-coated waiter, with a ridiculously pompous air, spreads a napkin in Davinia's lap. Davinia seems hardly to notice him, but he notices me and sneers in my face, at his familiarity with my Lady. The dining room is quiet, has a cool, spacious, unhurried air, but I find I am suspicious of it and cannot relax.

"Tell me Richard, what do the staff think of me?"

This is such a pointed question, it would have been better put had she been staring me in the face, but as it is, she gazes dreamily out of the window, and her voice has such a cool languor in it one might be forgiven for thinking she's barely interested in the answer.

"I'm not party to staff gossip, Davinia." This is not a lie, but not quite the truth either, and it does not satisfy her.

"I notice you don't mix with them. They don't like you either, then?"

"Oh, dislike is perhaps too strong a word. I have nothing in common with them, that's all. They're all young women, either single or recently married, all of them just starting out. They seem not to know what to say to me, and I don't know what to say to them. I had thought politeness would be enough to get me by, but they seem to demand intimacy – not so much in the personal sense of course, but more that I join in with workplace politics, take sides, you know? And really I can't be bothered with any of that, so they

ignore me. They think me odd perhaps."

"Yes... I can see how they might. I find you odd as well."

"Ah,..."

"I don't mean in a bad way." She smiles, as if to placate me, but I'm not comforted by it. Odd is not good. "I know they find me cold," she goes on. "There's nothing new in this. I've never managed to get on with other women. They seem to find it offensive that a woman should want to take charge. They resent it, yet they'd be the first to complain of male chauvinism if I were a man. Tell me – do you also find me cold?"

Woa! Where is she going with this? What does she want me to say?

"The question, Davinia, should be: do I find myself able to work for you? And the answer is that I do. How I find you, personally, is neither here nor there."

She smiles. Have I done well? I don't know. The waiter comes to take our order. She chooses a light lunch, chicken salad – and I do the same. I know it will not fill me, but I cannot eat a bigger lunch while my Lady picks at something dainty. It would be indecent.

"Richard, there is a position coming up – assistant head. I agree you're hopelessly unqualified and you lack experience, but yours is the only application I'm inclined to support."

I sit back, nonplussed. "I'd no idea there was such a position."

"There isn't at the moment, but the governors are in the process of being persuaded to create one. They'd rather have a proper deputy-head at the moment, but there simply isn't the money for it. You realise it's not a permanent thing – not like a real deputy headship, and though there is an additional allowance, it wouldn't be worth very much I'm afraid."

"I'll consider it, of course. Thank you, Davinia."

She lowers her chin to her hand and scrutinises me. "You understand why I want you to apply?"

Yes. I am unambitious and submissive. I would do anything she asked of me, because I am wrapped around her little finger. I would present no threat to her authority.

"I couldn't say," I tell her.

"Really?"

"We both know I'm not a very good teacher."

"Some parents would disagree with you."

"They would?"

"And anyway, as I see it, your abilities as a teacher are irrelevant. It's more your abilities... as a man. You are an authority figure, whether you see yourself that way or not."

"Well... as I said before, thank you, Davinia. I shall give it some serious thought, if and when it comes up."

"Oh... it will come up, I assure you." She gives a little start and a curiously insincere smile. "I seem to have dropped my napkin."

She makes no effort to retrieve it – considers it unladylike I suppose – and instead regards me pointedly, so I slide from my chair and kneel, my face inches from her knees which she seems to have arranged somehow for me to admire, though I must be imagining this. I'm trying not to look, even from the corner of my eye, though the energy I imagine coming from her is overwhelming.

I pick up the napkin, but do not give it to her. Instead I exchange it for an unused one from a spare setting, hand it to her, and she smiles as she takes it. The napkin she dropped is charged with her presence, having lain in her lap, and somehow I shall remove it from the restaurant without anyone seeing me. If you've never been in thrall to a woman, you will perhaps not understand this.

"You're an ambitious man, Richard."

"No, not at all... "

"I think you are."

"You're mistaken. Ambition is something I no longer possess in any measure."

"But there are so many kinds of ambition aren't there: professional, social, spiritual... sexual?"

Did she just say sexual?

"That's as may be, but I believe it's also wise to know one's limits, and play strictly within them."

"True. So... what are *my* limits, do you think?"

"Ah... I believe you're an exception Davinia. Limits do not apply in your case. You are perfectly capable of achieving anything you set your mind to."

Is that a hint of a blush? Her eyebrows narrow a little. Surprise? Suspicion? "Don't be silly Richard. I'm the headmistress of a small village primary school, in a part of the world no one has even heard of."

"You are now, yes, but are you telling me you'll still be there in two years time?"

I've surprised her now. "Am I really so transparent to you?"

"You're ambitious. A headship is not the end for you. You're young, eager for power, influence. You want to make a difference."

"But will I be happy, or lonely do you think, in my pursuit of power?"

"Only you can say."

"I do enjoy the power I have over others. There are more people willing to submit to the will of others than you might suppose. It's exhilarating. You should try it."

I cannot help it: I smile. She blinks – have I offended her? And then, after a moment: "You really must do something about that house of yours. It's no longer *you*, Richard."

"Oh?"

"It's a family house. I understand it might be what you're used to. But you're no longer a family man, are you? Single men have no need of gardens and three bedrooms. You should get yourself a bachelor pad. Something smaller, more modern"

She has a point, but she does not know about Durleston. She does not know the ruin of someone else's home is the only interface I have with what is dark and secret and a bit untidy in my past, something calling me back to make a proper account of myself. Or is that just another disaster I am unable to avert, even when I can see it coming?

"You're right. I am thinking of moving actually. It was never a permanent thing. Quite unsuitable really."

"Good... good." She's tapping the table with her finger now. She glances at her watch. "There's somewhere I'd like to show you, after lunch."

"Really?"

"Will you come with me? Have you time?"

"Of course."

Victoria court is a modern development on the Marine Drive, a former Edwardian B + B, now demolished and rebuilt as seaside apartments in the modern, white render and glass style. I'm not sure why we're pulling up in front of them, nor why she leads me up to the top floor and lets herself into an apartment overlooking the Marine Gardens. There are French windows, and a balcony, and there's an overwhelmingly clinical brightness about the whole place, with its white walls and its pale oak flooring.

I'm confused, thinking perhaps she's showing me the sort of

place I should aspire to, but Victoria court is far too up-market for me. And then why does she have a key? The apartment doesn't look occupied – too bare, the paint so new the dust hasn't even had time to settle.

"I've just bought it," she explains. "Property prices have dropped so much lately, you'd be surprised. I intend to make a profit when things bounce back."

"And if they don't?"

She gives a little shrug. "They always do. And anyway, I'm in no hurry."

It's feasible, I suppose, that I might have scraped together enough money to buy a place like this, but I would not have had the foresight, nor the nerve to gamble all my assets on such a speculation, even though she's right and it's more or less certain she *will* make a profit. It's only my narrow, pedestrian mind which equates property ownership with habitation, and is blind to the larger materialistic potential of it as a mere investment.

"It's... impressive," I tell her. "I'd no idea you were planning to live in Southport."

"I'm not. I'm going to let it out in the summer."

"I see."

"Until then I'm just going to use it at the weekends."

"Sounds nice. It's very modern... very stylish."

She's looking impatient and I wish I could catch up quickly enough to find out what she means by all of this before it's too late and she ends up being *really* displeased with me. She's tapping her foot now, almost imperceptibly, shiny black shoes, strapless high heels, and my eyes are drawn, and not for the first time, to the intriguingly erotic décolletage of her toes. "Richard, you might as well know: I don't wait for men to take the initiative."

"I'm sure you don't, Davinia. Why should you?"

"You're missing my point, I think."

"Em..."

"Let me try it this way then: why is there a napkin from the Duke of York dining room in your pocket?"

"There isn't."

She feigns crossness. I've seen her do this with the children, and the scowl is quite chilling. "Do you want me to insist that you show it to me?"

I'm not sure how she can *insist* – or at least expect me to comply,

but then I realise if it came to a stand-off, I probably *would* comply because that is the nature of our relationship: I would always be the one to obey. I claim not to understand how a woman could ever become slave to a man, yet it seems I am capable of becoming slave to a woman – this woman anyway – or at least pretending, in order that she will be pleased with me – and I am persuaded, by my imagination at least, that to please this woman would be a very special and worthwhile thing indeed.

I pull out the napkin rather sheepishly. "All right... but I don't know why I did it. It was a mistake... that's all."

"It was *not* a mistake, Richard. I watched you do it. It was quite deliberate."

Silence. I think I might be blushing.

"Well?" she asks. "Shall I tell you why you did it?"

"Em..." she cannot possibly know, so I'm happy to let her try – perhaps her explanation will be easier to understand and admit to than anything I could come up with myself.

"It's because the napkin was in my lap. It was *touching* me... down there. Perhaps you fancy it may even... *smell,*... of me. Substituting it was clever. Stealing it was naughty, but also.... very flattering. Yes... I am surprised... but flattered."

This is bad.

"Davinia, don't get the wrong idea."

"We'll discuss what the idea was in a moment. For now though, just hand it over."

I pass her the napkin, which she folds neatly and slowly, while contemplating her next words. I truly did not expect this, and my heart is in my throat because I don't know what to say to her. And there is too much light in the apartment – it seems amplified and clinical and dazzling. I feel the beginnings of a headache, but this is not the time to weaken, to let go of the mask of my smartness and my sophistication:

I am sophisticated.

I am a man.

I am in control.

"I think we should go," I tell her, trying to pre-empt her next move, trying to take the dominant lead, but there is a weakness in my tone – it seems almost pleading and does little to persuade her.

"Not yet, Richard. I want to think about this."

"There's nothing to think about."

She takes a breath, like one about to swim underwater for a while: "You're what?... in love with me... or something?"

"Of course not!"

"Richard, it's obvious when you lie. Your ears go red."

They do?

"Davinia, we shouldn't say any more... you're my headmistress, my colleague, my boss... think of our position. This is,.. totally inappropriate."

"You started it when you took that napkin. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

Actually yes, I didn't think she'd notice.

"Really, it's nothing. I have a thing about napkins... I collect them... it's childish, I know. It's... what's the word... kleptomania,..."

"Don't be absurd. *Are* you in love with me?"

She's pushing, drilling into my head with her eyes, and I'm irritated and disorientated enough to let go of my reservations and if admitting it is the only thing that will shock her enough into shutting her up for a moment, then so be it.

"All right," I tell her. "Yes, I'm in love with you. How could I not be? Every man in Marsden is tongue tied when he's near you."

I try to hide myself in that imaginary crowd again, as if it lessens the importance of it if I can convince her I am but one in so many. And how does she respond? She takes the news impassively, as if it comes as no surprise.

"I see," she tells me.

They say that when you realise you're digging yourself into a metaphorical hole you should just stop talking because there's no sense in making the hole any deeper. Me? I just go on digging.

"I realise I'm the last man on earth you'd ever think of in a... well... a romantic way." *Oh, for pity's sake Richard.* "So... I'm perfectly aware what I feel is just a ridiculous infatuation, and something I must overcome, that you will find it tedious, no doubt... or inconvenient... or tiresome." *For heaven's sake stop!* "But you mustn't concern yourself that I shall ever allow it to affect our professional relationship. It's not your problem... it's mine, and I shall resolve it." *And how do you plan on doing that Richard?* "Davinia, I find this all terribly embarrassing. Can we... move on... sort of forget we ever had this conversation?"

She stands tall, silent, heels together, hands clasped in front of her. She gives me a hint of a smile, but there's more guile in it than

tenderness. "Don't be in such a rush to overcome it," she says. "I might enjoy the idea of you being foolishly infatuated with me."

I realise with a terrible shock my mistress is changing before my eyes. From cool beauty, oblivious to my suffering, she has already undergone the transition to lesbian, to sexless mannequin, and now to this... but what is *this*?

"Naturally, I could never fall in love with *you*," she reassures me. "And I think you understand you don't *really* love me. Not *me.* It's just someone you think I am. If you really knew me you'd think and feel differently. No, Richard, what you want is simply to have sex with me."

"What? No... no that's absolutely *not* what I want."

"Yes it is. It's just curiosity, that's all – there no need to make such a fuss about it."

"Really, I wasn't."

"Well, I disagree. So, what are we going to do about it?"

"We should go. That's what we should do. I'll get over it."

She ignores me. "There's no bed here yet, but I'm sure we could improvise."

What's wrong with me? Davinia... *Davinia* is offering herself to me in this strange, brightly lit and bare, but incredibly sexy space... and I'm what? Hesitating? My God, Richard, is it so long since you were with a woman, you no longer remember what to do?

"We shouldn't. Really, I couldn't. Not with you. You don't understand... you see it's..."

"Richard, shut up. It would be better if we simply did it. I'm sure you'd find it quite ordinary, really."

"I... I... doubt that very much, but,..."

"Oh... we'd be embarrassed afterwards, I suppose, but we'd get over it, and hopefully move on. Richard look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Davinia, the dominatrix? Is God laughing at me? He sends me one woman who is the submissive slave of another man, and bids me rescue her, while at the same time having me fall slavishly in love with a dominatrix?

"Don't do this Davinia. Think of your career – if anyone found out at school."

"No one would find out. I'm sure neither of us have anything to gain by talking about it. Really, Richard, I don't see the problem."

Neither should I: she is the most beautiful woman I have ever

had the pleasure of being with, and she is offering to make come true the secret dream of every man – uncomplicated carnal knowledge, without the price of love, without its myriad declarations and entanglements, without marriage and babies and... Yes.. yes, I know it never works out that way, but you don't think of those things at the time it's being offered, do you?

"It would be... wrong. I couldn't."

"Does it hurt you, that I make light of your feelings? Does it hurt you that I offer you just sex without committing any other part of me?"

"Yes... I think it does."

"Good. It pleases me that it hurts you." Her expression melts a little, though her eyes widen in appreciation. "No... it doesn't please me. That's not the right word, forgive me. I find it exciting, actually."

She need not be so honest – she could cover this up, hide the fact that she enjoys this moment only for the power it grants her over me. But that is *not* Davinia.

"Tell me," she insists. "If you could touch me right now, where would it be?"

She wants to make a game of it, wants me to say dirty words to her, but I cannot. I am too old and too weary for such childishness. I should walk away, find a bus, get myself home any way I can, but my mistress is teasing me, and I *must* play her game, for no other reason than she commands it. What I feel is pure and mysterious, and she responds by trying to turn it into something base.

"Your toes," I tell her.

"My what?"

"The... little gap between your big toe and the one next to it. I should like very much to... put my finger inside of it..."

She looks down at her feet, bemused as if she has never thought of such a thing. "So subtle, Richard! Is it that you daren't think of touching me anywhere else?"

I have no answer. My head is bowed. This is terrible.

"I can't do this, Davinia. It would... dishonour what I feel. Do you understand? I admire your manner, your confidence, your beauty. I would do anything for you. But not this. Now please, take me home."

She's not listening. She slides her left foot forward a little, rotates her ankle as if to show off this erogenous feature, her

expression curious and testing. "You can touch it if you like," she tells me.

"No."

"Please, I'm curious. I... I think I'd like you to touch it. Any other man would have wanted to touch... well... men generally have no imagination? Is it because you're older, I wonder?"

"There's a difference between what a man wants and what he should or should not do. Listen to me: I'm in love with the idea, and the look, and feel of you. You are a magnificently powerful woman, Davinia, and I adore you."

She sighs, looks almost pitying at me. "I doubt any of that is really true, Richard. And in any case, it's of no use to me."

"I can see that."

"Touch my toe, then. Slide your finger into the hollow, and if I like it, who knows what other little hollows I might permit your fingers to explore?"

I shake my head and she turns away at last. The keys are in her hand, she tosses them impatiently so that they jangle. She's done with me. Unimpressed.

"All right," she says. "I'll take you home."

I'm relieved to be out of the clinical light of that bare apartment, but I'm also nursing a peculiarly belated and deflated desire. I might have touched her. I might have knelt by her feet, close to the hem of her skirt, close to her legs and the feel of her stockings. And now I'm ashamed as she drives me home. I feel like a eunuch. I am of no use to her. She knows of my love, laughs at it, and scorns me with the easy offer of her superficial self.

She drops me at the end of Mill lane. Keeps her hands on the wheel, looks straight ahead. She is not angry, not upset in any way – this is how she always is. I'm conscious only that I am detaining her by my slowness to reach for the door catch, by my search for parting words that would make sense. But nothing will do, so I pull down the mask of politeness and pretend that nothing has happened.

"I... enjoyed lunch. Thank you."

She turns, graces me with a surprised look, because she knows I mean it, knows I harbour no bad feelings, no bruised ego.

"Richard, I'm... sorry... if I've spoiled things... Sometimes, I go too far if I don't get my way."

"Nothing is spoiled." I'm lying and no doubt my ears are crimson.

Everything is ruined.

I flick the catch and make to leave but then, as if she has been saving this to the very last moment, she holds something out to me. It's the napkin, a neatly folded triangle, even more potently charged now than when it first slipped from her lap this afternoon. There's also a look in her eye: she's granting me permission to nurse my infatuation. This is strange territory. It means it isn't over, and I don't know if that's a good thing or not. I hesitate a moment, then take it, but before she releases it, she leans close and tells me: "That's a lovely tie. But if you wear it again, I'll take it to mean you've changed your mind, that you want to go straight back to my apartment and fuck my brains out. And back we shall go, dear Richard. Are we clear?"

I nod, my mouth too dry to even think of speaking. I slip the napkin into my pocket, seal the bargain, so to speak, then step out and close the door.

The Jaguar purrs quietly away.

Chapter 17

I find Christmas such a tired institution, and it's a well-worn cliché that it seems to come around sooner each year. Obviously it does not; it's just age that blurs the seasons into one. I pay it no heed now. Its tacky reminders, appearing each September, have erased all meaning, and I am left to oversee the production of Marsden C. of E. Primary School's nativity with the same professional indifference as Harvest time and Easter.

I do not wear the tie.

And Davinia appears not to pay much notice to it anyway.

Things are as they have always been – she even drives me home now and then, but makes no mention of the Duke of York Hotel, her apartment, or stolen napkins. It's up to me, she's saying, up to me to fret over it, to ache for that base knowledge of her, in defiance of my finer feelings, while she... well, while she appears to think nothing at all.

Such are the games my mistress plays.

I am sitting in the lounge of Marsden Hall, surrounded by symbols of festive cheer: the trimmings and the cards, and in the hallway there is a pretty tree, spruce scented, and tinselled up, with a star on top. I see Chelsea, over my father's shoulder, standing on tip-toe, while she puts the finishing touches to it. It's mid December now, but the sun shines in defiance of the season and, as yet, we have had not a single frost.

I am a little high with success, having just watched my thirty charges fluff and bluff their way through their Nativity play. An hour ago I was sitting dutifully to one side, while Davinia stood before the assembled parents in the school hall and praised the children for their efforts, praised the governors for their support, and finally praised me. It cannot have gone unnoticed that I blushed. She spoke well, eloquently, faultlessly, was cool and elegant and sparkling bright, her blonde hair loose and shining, her expression exquisitely stern.

Our honoured guest was a well-groomed fellow by the name of Samuel Blinkhorn - Marsden's Member of Parliament, who my fevered imagination led me to believe had an eye for Davinia. It was the same fevered imagination that led me to observe the carefully calculated smile that she returned him. He was older than

me, looked knackered and baggy-eyed from all his politicking, but otherwise possessed a sort of urbane smartness. His persona was made to measure, while mine is off the peg. And as he sat there preening, I was thinking that Davinia had no use for me, no use for a husband, a soul-mate, nor even an idle playmate. She needed a vehicle to propel her from the sad environs of this northern, working class village. To this end Blinkhorn would suit her very well – get her down to London, furnish her with certain connections, in exchange for access to what she had offered me just that once in her shiny, vapidly sterile apartment.

All of this is jealousy.

Petty.

Filthy and unfounded, and ridiculous but I cannot shake it off.

And now, as Chelsea brings my brimful cup of tea, I am thinking of the tie, the tie I have kept in a drawer since that day at the Duke of York, and I am thinking of Sunday, and the look in Davinia's eyes when I wear it. And I *will* wear it because I *will* have her. And I will have her because she smiled at the honourable Samuel Blinkhorn, MP. And though they are perfectly suited to one another, he does not deserve her and could not possibly enjoy her the way she ought to be enjoyed.

And how is that?

How the hell should I know?

I am confused, irrational...

"You did so well today, Mr Hunter." Chelsea is smiling at me, and I am trying to look as if I know what she's talking about.

"The Nativity," she reminds me.

"Oh?"

"My nephew's in year one. Lucas Fry. I came to watch him."

"Ah, Lucas." I do not know him. "A lovely lad." I'm thinking I'd better look him up on Monday, then I will not be so defenceless again. "I didn't see you, or I would have said hello."

"Oh... it's all right. You looked very busy."

"Nonsense, I would always make time for you."

This is said quite innocently, and without a mind for flirtatious interpretation. She blushes, but I don't know what this means. I'm sweating. My hand trembles a little, as usual, as I take the cup. I'm unable to fool her with my smart façade. The weeks I spent in Durleston bolstered me but are fast fading now, unable to protect me from the monster that is Davinia, but I am afraid something

even more elemental lies in wait for me in Durleston, so I cannot return to it. Chelsea furrows her brow at my dithering hands, but moves on without another word.

My father is quiet today and I fill the long silences with haphazard comments – asking questions of him, plucking them at random from my past, and then, when he makes no sign of having heard me, I answer them for him. And finally I ask if he remembers the gardens of the old Willet place, and did they really run down to the river once – lush green swards, lovingly mown, and were the colours pretty in the spring and summer months? And finally he replies that Doris is such a lovely girl and do I know when she'll be coming to see him again.

Chelsea is just passing and I happen to catch her eye. Doris? She smiles and shakes her head. Doris is not real to us, only to him, a character inhabiting the places he explores now on the other side of his head. I touch the back of his hand and he appears to look at me, but I'm no longer sure it's me he sees.

There's no sense in lingering late tonight.

I leave Marsden Hall, to be waved off by Chelsea but she does not wait long enough to see me climbing into my new four-by-four: shiny black, dark tinted glass, twelve greedy miles to the gallon. It's not really new, but impressionably so because it has a personal plate that came with the car, and which disguises its age somewhat. I dare not drive it far because petrol is so expensive these days. It takes me five minutes to get home, a distance I could have walked easily in ten, but I feel armoured as I cruise down Mill Lane – no longer a dressy man on foot and vulnerable to the hurling of clods from my scummy neighbours. Now I am a truly successful man: a demi-god.

The year is at its lowest ebb. Dark at four thirty, and it's feeling like midnight now as I pull onto the drive and let myself in. I know Lillian's there before I see her, just as I have known on the odd occasion over these past weeks that she has let herself in during the day – only later to discover the missing eggs, the missing packet of biscuits, the missing pint of milk. I have compensated for this shrinkage and generally double up on such items. As for the borrower herself, I have not seen her since that occasion when she came to me with a black eye.

I find her in the kitchen now. She has fashioned for herself a kind of nest on the floor, made from her coat and a blanket she has

brought with her, and she is lying with her head pressed against the refrigerator. She's awake but lying very still, only her eyes moving as she tracks me.

"Lillian?"

"I'm sorry, Adam, but I was cold," she tells me.

Her brow is moist and glistening in the dim, pathetic light of the eco-bulbs.

"Are you sick?"

"I think so. It's just a sniffle. It'll pass."

"Go up to bed – this is stupid, lying here."

"I didn't want to intrude – not without your permission."

"Go up. Have you eaten? I'll bring you some soup."

She nods, rises stiffly, and moves off towards the stairs. There is a plague of influenza – half the school away with it, but she lives such an isolated existence, I wonder how she can have caught it, unless it was from him.

I find I'm glad for her company.

This surprises me. When I am with her, I am protected from thoughts of Davinia – just like when I am with Davinia, I am protected from thoughts of Lillian, each of them the perfect antidote for the other.

A moment ago, the only thing on my mind was to take out the tie in readiness for Sunday, and to hold the napkin to my face, that I still fancy bears the traces of Davinia's scent. Moments ago, I had been tingling at the prospect of seeing her, of pulling at her clothes, and baring the breasts of that chilly mistress, and giving way to the mad delirium of her carnal conquest, the clinical light of her apartment rendering in stark relief every aspect of our naked stupidity.

But now I am caught safe in the quagmire of a different kind of trap, calmed down by this reminder of my other self, or rather this postponed obligation to declare myself, to hold myself up to the world, to hold myself to this woman, and to die with her, for surely there is only death in such sleepiness, death in the danger of such a supernatural coming.

I take her up a shirt to sleep in, find her flopped against the pillows fully dressed, too sick to move, so I curl the corner of the duvet over her and let her sleep. I make soup and bring it to her, but so deep is her sleep, now, I fear to wake her, so leave her be – eventually turning in myself to sleep fitfully upon the sofa

downstairs. I tip-toe back every few hours, to look at her. I don't know why I do this. Is it to check if she's still breathing?

It crosses my mind I would have some explaining to do were she to die in my bed, but each time her steady breaths reassure me. It's dawn before I have the courage to reach out and press my palm to her brow. It feels hot and damp, but not dangerously so and I sense the worst has passed. She is strong, this poor, lost soul.

"Will I live?" she mumbles.

"I dare say, or at least it will not be this that kills you."

"Thank you, Adam."

By afternoon, she has changed into my shirt and is sitting up in bed, her hair matted, her face drawn.

"At least your eye seems better," I tell her.

She smiles. "You have a sense of humour?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it for a long time." And then: "That sounds so weak, doesn't it? There are many who'd be grateful for what I've got." I was thinking of her feelings, for surely she has much less to be cheerful about than me, but she looks at me and shakes her head. "Oh... I doubt there are many who would swap places with you."

"Really?"

"Why would they, if you have forgotten how to laugh?"

"I suppose... I only meant..."

"I know... and it was kind of you."

"Do you think he might have come for you, last night?"

"I don't know."

"I mean... if he came..."

"Yes... yes... he'll be angry."

Safer then to stay here, I'm thinking. How can she go back, now?

Let her stay, you coward!

No!

What about Davinia?

"I'm feeling a little better," she tells me.

"Good. You really can't go back to Durleston, you know?"

There! I've said it.

"I must."

"Why, when we both know it's so dangerous?"

"Because I cannot come to you, Adam. Not if I am to serve you properly. For that you must come to me. You must come into Durleston, face your fears, and release me."

None of this makes sense. It seems her misfortune has warped her mind, her understanding, relieved her of her self respect, her independence, her sanity. She's intelligent, beautiful, articulate. Why chain herself to anyone? "Lillian... Lillian! What happened to you? You were once such an ordinary, lovely girl. You had a good job...money..."

"Yes... all of that, perhaps. I don't know, Adam. What happened to you? We're both lost, aren't we? But it's not hopeless. We have each made our offerings to the gods... and now here we are. We did not know each other before, but now we do. I'm sure that means something."

"If only I could believe that."

"Well... never mind. If I could stay another tonight, I would be grateful. I should be well enough to go back tomorrow."

"Yes, yes... rest."

I don't know if I should be relieved or not. I have invited her to stay, opened my door to her, but she refuses me, says there is a technicality, a condition... that I must first seek her out...

And release her.

Chapter 18

My son is in the army. Did I tell you that? The United States Marine Corps. He is in Iraq, or perhaps Afghanistan by now... might even be dead for all I know, because it's years since I had any word, and they seem to be losing so many of our boys these days. His name is Ches – Chesney – after my wife's father, who was also a Marine. God help me, I did not want him to join. I wanted him to graduate, to get a safe job, and a suit, and a company car... and a good woman to love him. He called me an asshole, and joined anyway, because he had a liking for guns, and computer games, where guns split people's heads like melons, and all in the name of entertainment.

I no longer understand the world.

I try so hard to create my own safe little world in self defence, but the unintelligible one is stronger and is forever sweeping away my feeble efforts. My daughter? What ruined my daughter? I'll tell you: it was the cocaine they traded at the school she attended. With cocaine, you see, there is no room for reason, as I discovered... and the princess I watched grow from plump babe to willowy teen, was gone from me with the first sniff, gone also from herself, sucked down into the company of the damned.

Children grow, and it is the dilemma of parenthood, that for all of our investment, the whole idea is that they will grow away from you. The best you can hope is that they grow straight, that they grow free, and safe from the pitfalls of the world, and that they grow loving you, rather than hating you.

Sometimes, when I look at Chelsea, I see the girl my daughter could have been, and I want to weep, though I dare say if my daughter looked at Chelsea she would laugh spitefully, and call her a fat cow whose only calling in life was to wipe the arses of old people. Better by far to be a vain, promiscuous, fashion slave, with a string of dead-end jobs, and deadbeat boyfriends, than a decent, caring woman.

And my wife? Let me just say for now I pretended for a long time she was not seeing him... the man with the improbably perfect teeth. Yes, I bored her, but she had not the courage to say it until she had found someone to excite her in the way I could not. Then one evening as I drove home from work, I saw the sun setting over

the ocean, and felt myself crushed under the wreckage, felt also the first searing shocks of guilt, that I had been unable to avert any of it – or worse, that I was entirely to blame for having failed to hold such a simple thing as an ordinary life together. The sense of shame grew so strong in me, I found myself unconsciously making a left at the junction, instead of a right – found myself at the airport, instead of home. I drew out as much cash as I could, booked myself on the next flight east, called her from the other side of the Atlantic, told her she was free, that I wasn't coming back.

Now don't you think I'd be telling you any of this if I hadn't slipped out to the corner shop while Lillian was sleeping, and am now reminiscing with that peculiar sense of self-pity that comes when memories are viewed through the amber haze of a whiskey bottle. With half of it gone already, I'm suddenly puzzled that I should be drinking at all, because I do not drink any more, not on this side of the Atlantic anyway. But things have a habit of catching us unawares.

The room has begun to slide, and I view the grungy walls from the tilted angles of a very drunken perspective. I am insensible, but aware of Lillian standing beside me now as I gaze up at her with that same obliqueness of vision. Whenever I look at her, she slides away, and I must blink to keep her in the centre of my world. She's wearing my shirt. White, against a golden brown skin. A dark woman. Delicate and lovely and very, very strange. And... what lovely legs! They go on for miles and miles and miles... and...

What's she asking me?

Drink?

"No, I don't drink much, normally."

There is something speculative about the way her hand reaches for the bottle, as if she's testing for my reaction. She has experience of drunken men then. Will I resist? No... I do not. Does she think I'm less of a drunkard, then? Does she want to taste? No... no of course not. She takes the bottle into the kitchen and tips the remains of it away. I check myself for signs of outrage as I hear it glugging down the sink – but there are none. I'm not lost to it then.

"Adam, what brought this on?"

What? No answer. What can I say? I give a deep, insensible sigh. She takes my arm, pulls me from my armchair and leads me upstairs. It's not yet dark – can't be late then. Sunday tomorrow. Must get my tie ready...

"My tie, Lillian."

"Your tie?"

She's pressing me upstairs. I am slipped into bed, relieved of my shirt and trousers, quick hands moving over me and finally folding me beneath the duvet. I'm wishing I was sensible enough to be enjoying this. Did she see my privates? Did she smirk? Were they smaller than his? Smaller too than those of the man with the improbably perfect teeth?

Oh dear. Do grow up Richard.

Or am I someone else when I am with her. Am I really Adam? Who are we anyway? Are we only a name?

"Am I boring, Lillian?"

"No... you are drunk, Adam."

"Lie with me."

"Adam, when you have the courage to possess me, then you may command me, and I will gladly lie with you. But for now I think I will sleep downstairs."

"Sleep?"

"Yes... *sleep*, Adam."

Chapter 19

So. It's morning. Nine a.m. and a whiskey headache; sickly. Lillian is sitting on the edge of the bed. She has put on my dressing gown, smells fresh and soapy from her shower.

"Lillian... I'm sorry. I don't know what happened."

"How do you feel?"

"As bad as I deserve. How did I get the whiskey bottle?"

"I heard you going out for it."

"Yes... yes, I remember now. I only went for bread and milk. How much did I drink?"

"Half."

Ohh... that would explain it then. "I need to get up, get showered... dressed."

"Going out again? More whiskey perhaps?"

"No. Church. It's Sunday. I always go to church on Sundays."

She's surprised. "You do?"

I slide groggily from bed, forgetting I am wearing only my shorts. I pull open the wardrobe, take down the tie, then on impulse, I take down another and show them both to her. "Will you choose for me? Which tie?"

"Tie? Adam, you said something about a tie last night. Is this important to you in some way?"

"Please choose."

She's nonplussed, thinks perhaps I am not yet sober, which is possibly true. She picks at random – eeny-meeny-miny-mo – and points to the plain blue silk. It is not the one Davinia has chosen as the signal. I hesitate, then close my eyes and nod.

"Thank you," I tell her. It's as well one of us has some sense, even if she does not realise it.

"You are... Christian?"

"What? Oh... Lord no. I go because I teach at a church school. It's sort of... expected."

"Ah... tradition then?"

"I suppose so. You?"

"Christian? No... Buddhist maybe... don't know. Like you. Tradition only... Buddhist tradition. Same superstitions as everyone else."

"Buddhist? Yes... of course."

"Adam, I don't think you are well enough to go anywhere."

I'm not, but I feel better after a shower, better still when I am dressed – Sunday best – and yet better still when my shiny, black four-by-four is crackling up by the church door, parking behind Davinia's Jaguar. I am not wearing *the* tie. I am wearing another that Lillian has chosen for me. How strange is this? I enter the church to the strangled strains of Bach, and with a sense of surfing my way around the reefs of a less fortunate fate.

Davinia is sitting upright and prim. She wears a black wool coat, and a silk scarf that has a silver sheen and flows around her neck like a moonlit river. But there's something different today: She's wearing her hair up tight, the nape of her neck bare and downy. To my surprise there is no room for me. There's a man sitting in my place: black suit, red tie. Do my eyes deceive me or is this the Right Honourable Samuel Blinkhorn MP?

I'm already half way up the church aisle. There are eyes upon me – Griselda Munchkin for one, so it would not do to flinch or look uncertain now. Heaven forbid I should have to retreat with my tail between my legs, or there would be some elbow prodding going on amongst the powdered ladies of the Mother's Union.

There is a space across the aisle from Blinkhorn. I look in on Davinia briefly, nod to her. I smile in recognition of our political representative, wait a fraction of a second for his reaction – an introduction, the offer of a handshake perhaps? But no, he seems preoccupied. There are beads of sweat on his brow; too much heat in him. I bid him a polite good morning, and slide, unflustered into my seat, lose my eyes in the hymn book, consult the reading in my pocket bible – yes, yes, I *do* carry one to church, and all of this is false I know, but it keeps me in a job and for now, there is a kind of comfort in it.

What does Blinkhorn's presence mean? Am I correct in my assumption after all? Was my green eyed lover's daydream more of a premonition than I knew? Will they be lunching together at the Duke of York? Will she take him to her apartment and invite him to put his finger in the gap between her toes?

Stop it Richard!

And anyway... for a man in his apparent condition, it would have to be something altogether more direct. Yet it also strikes me that the fucking of someone's brains out would do little for his wheezy chest, and might even kill him. He seems such an unlikely

Lothario, more an overworked, overstressed man of late middle years in need of gentle exercise and warm slippers. He does not need a Davinia Barkwell. But what a man wants and what he needs are very rarely the same thing.

Oh, shut up, Richard! And just thank God you did not wear the tie!

Yes... that would have been really, really embarrassing, wouldn't it?

The theme is Christmassy – as one would expect, I suppose, though I have largely switched off from the season now with the closing of the curtain on my school nativity. The Reverend Whitman opens the service. There is talk of birth, of life, of hope. And then a reading, by Mr. Hunter, who has kindly offered to step into the shoes of our beloved Mrs Waverly, who is sadly indisposed.

Of course, *I* am Mr. Hunter, but I do not move because, obviously, the Reverend Whitman means a different Mr. Hunter, one of the church's inner circle most likely – to be so honoured to give a reading before our most honourable VIP. I mean, doesn't he? I happen to glance at Davinia, who has a devious look in her eye, and half a smile on her lips, that I might be forgiven for interpreting as a kind of satisfaction. She has arranged this! She has taken the task, on my behalf... but failed to mention it. She means then... what?

To see me embarrassed?

Davinia?

Am I sweating? No. Hung over? Yes. Most definitely. I raise an eyebrow in her direction – the only rebuke I have the courage to offer, then walk up to the lectern and pray the reading is the one the good Reverend has left for me. No,.. he has reclaimed his bible. Did he mention which verse? Which chapters? No... but I *was* paying attention. Under the eyes of about 40 people, including our glassy eyed VIP, Mr. Hunter sighs, takes out his pocket bible, sifts his memory of the past few weeks, and clears his throat:

"Good morning..."

And they reply: "Good morning."

This is just like Friday assemblies – only the behaviour is much better. I think I might be in with a chance! Mr. Hunter pretends to relax, forces a smile, and begins: "When I was asked to pick a reading for this morning, I was at a loss... as there are so many appropriate for this time... but I felt I could do no better than the one so sweetly read at our school nativity this week, by Amanda

Becket."

There are smiles all round, and nods. They may have been expecting something else, but I'm on safe ground here. Griselda Munchkin preens at the mention of her granddaughter. And I begin. "Isaiah, chapter nine, Verses six and seven..."

A man can only control himself for so long, hold himself upright when he is otherwise hollow. Ten minutes is about it for me, which amply covers the time of my unexpected celebrity. For the rest I sit in meditative introspection – paying little heed to what else the service has to offer, and trusting to luck Davinia has no more hand-grenades to lob in my direction. Was this my punishment for rejecting her? I had not taken her for a vindictive woman.

When the service closes I am in no mood for conversation, and am glad for the Right Honourable Samuel Blinkhorn's monopoly of my apparent nemesis – that I might slip away without further distress. But outside, the chilled December air calms me, and I wait by the car because I am a child and want her to see that it is mine, that I am still a part of her world, the world of ambition, and clinically lit apartments where ambitious lovers entwine. I want her to see the careless turn of my head, when I drive away.

I wait a long time, but eventually she emerges – not quite leaning upon the arm of our honourable member, but in step with him in a way that tells me she is not averse to whatever game it is he thinks he's playing. She looks up, sees me and I feel a quiver of delight because she is so elegantly poised, so cool in her demeanour, and all of this calm indifference seems targeted at me. Does she think me angry perhaps? There is no sign she fears it. I nod to her; acknowledgement that I submit to her punishment without complaint, that indeed I salute her ingenuity. And no: I do not hate her for it.

In the meantime, Blinkhorn is attentive. They are not talking shop, not discussing the role of primary education in a liberal democracy. It's small talk. Blinkhorn has a train to catch, back to London, back to Westminster, and the job that's going to kill him if he's unfortunate enough to find himself re-elected. But for now he dallies with the sparkling jewel of Davinia... and who can blame him? No... he's not married, so there would be no scandal in it. But what Blinkhorn needs is a wife, and it would be better if he *were* married because Davinia would make a far better mistress, than a confidant. Davinia Barkwell is not the kind of stuff that wives are

made from. Let him have her then, and good luck to him. Naturally, I do not mean any of this. I'm too infatuated with her to take the sensible course. And my heart is aching at the thought of them together.

Lillian is waiting. Well, not exactly waiting – hiding is a better word, waiting only for the cover of darkness before slipping back into Durleston, through the gap in the fence. In the meantime she has made a chicken stir-fry, with red peppers and rice. My shopping is eccentric, but she has made the best of the ingredients she's managed to find. I did not ask her to do this, but am glad for it now, as we sit down to lunch.

It would work, I'm thinking. She might hide here for ages and no one would know. And taking responsibility for her would pull me clean away from the toxicity of Davinia – except I cannot truly believe that's all there is to her. But this is my infatuation speaking, not my empathy.

Anyway, Lillian:

"Church went well, Adam?" She speaks softly, so the couple next door will not hear her. "You feel... blessed, now?"

"I think I may be out of my depth actually."

"No... religion is easy. It is spiritual matters that are difficult."

"You speak with a wisdom beyond your years, Lillian."

"Ha... but I am old Adam. An old soul. You have no idea how very old I am!"

"You've lived more, seen more than most, been exposed to more than is good for any decent human being. But you are not old. You have the face of a child when you sleep. I think that's how you have survived."

"You talk such sweet rubbish Adam. If I knew no better I would say you were trying to make love to me."

The couple next door are approaching orgasm. The rhythmic banging coming through the wall suggests she may be on the kitchen counter while he's lunging at her. She's making all the noise, a rising chorus of lusty squeals that has often disturbed me from my sleep, had me willing them to climax, so I might turn over and slip back into the peaceful, post-coital silence. But they seem to be struggling this morning.

"Your neighbours are very energetic. This is twice already."

"Yes... they're very... young..."

"Does it not make you feel?... well..." she raises an eyebrow

suggestively.

"What? Lord no... I'm far too old for that sort of thing."

She laughs. "Humour Adam? You see? All is not lost."

"Yes..."

"Was your girlfriend at Church this morning?"

"She's not my girlfriend. But yes, she was there."

"I thought so. You would not have been so keen to go otherwise. Am I right?"

My smile is enough to answer her.

"Ah... poor Adam. Do you want to tell me about the tie, now?"

"Em... No. Rather not. Too complicated."

"At least tell me, did I choose the right one for you?"

"I think you did yes, under the circumstances. Thank you."

"My pleasure."

Still, there has been no satisfaction from next door. The noise subsides, but without reaching a pointed climax. Just as I dare to hope we can finish our lunch in peace, they start again... from very beginning.

"She is making him feel inadequate," Lillian observes. "He has it in his head now that he cannot reach her. Once that thought is there, it is very difficult for a man. Do you agree?"

"It depends. If he sees her as a woman, a woman he wishes to reach then yes. If she's just an object to him, then no because then he doesn't see her at all, and anything she thinks or does is irrelevant to him."

"Exactly so. But this man truly desires her, I think. However she is not a skilful lover, and it will break them. So, I do not have high hopes for this relationship."

"Perhaps then I'll be able to get some sleep. Tea?"

"Thank you. This is a lovely shirt you have lent to me. Good quality. You are a quality kind of man, I think?"

"There's a certain comfort to be found in it – when you feel quality is lacking in yourself. Provided you can afford it, of course."

"Ah... yes. I did not mean it that way, but your confession is interesting. Oh... listen to them. She needs to fake it now, then take him in her mouth. He would come quickly that way, then let him rest, and service herself if she must, while he sleeps." she smiles. "Listen to me... I sound like a whore, but I am not a whore, Adam."

"I know... you said."

The girl climaxes suddenly, fakes it possibly, as if at Lillian's

bidding. Soon afterwards he roars out his own release, and there is quiet once more. Lillian sighs. "I think it would drive me mad, to live here."

"I'm sorry, but I think you may already be a little mad."

She takes this as a compliment and gives me a quirky smile. "As are you, Adam."

"Thank you."

But the silence is too much now – too much for us to fill without the danger of indiscretions.

"Do you ever come into the woods at night?" she asks.

"No."

"But why not?"

"There are too many unfriendly ghosts at night."

"And in the daytime? Are the ghosts more friendly to you then?"

"Normally, yes... but all the friendly ones are in hiding now."

"Are they afraid of something?"

"There's a monster, Lillian."

"Ah..." She thinks on this for a while, and then: "The night ghosts are friendly too, I suspect. It's just that you have never tried to make their acquaintance. As for the monster, it's what do you call it: a myth? It's just a story put about to frighten children."

"Am I a child then?"

She takes my hands, draws them across the table towards her so we meet in the middle, and she presses them down flat, her own hands on top. There is such a heat in them, but the the metal of her bindings catch the table and distract me from enjoying the sensation she seems intent on delivering. It distracts me from the contemplation of this side of her, by reminding me of another. She knows it... is distracted by them herself, irritated by them, shakes her head clear, and presses down all the more warmly as if to win me back from the darkness.

"We are both children, Adam. Caught up in a world we do not understand. But the monster is still a story got up to frighten us. There is *no* monster. There is *nothing* to be afraid of."

What she means to say is that there is plenty to be afraid of, but that we should pay it no heed. It might very well destroy us, but where's the harm in that if we can but once grant life to the potential that lies between us. And what is that? To take her now? To return the favour of next door's entertainment? Let them hear us panting and moaning and crashing the furniture? Is the measure of

our potential no more than that? Ten minutes of lovemaking?

"I do not love you Lillian."

"Yes you do, Adam. We have always been in love. *Always*. Do you not feel it?"

She really is mad. But I do understand this goes far beyond the simple *act* of love. She bewitches me with the suggestion of what lies hidden in the silences between her words. They take me to the depths of my self, and she connects with the parts of me that exist: the pain, the shame, the madness – and not as I would have the world believe I am, the parts that are mere fantasy. She *sees* me, truly. Surely, I can declare myself to the world this once through her, instead of hiding from it through my stupid infatuation with Davinia.

It's forty years ago, and Lillian is turning round to choose the one who shall tug her hair. She calls my name, but there is no reply. I am not there. Forgive me Lillian.

I wake alone, in the darkness of my room and she has gone, slipped through the gap in the fence, gone into the night, to dwell once more in the darkness of Durleston wood, where she waits for me. And she has left my shirt upon the bed, a lifeless covering, meaningless without her in it.

Chapter 20

The week is short. The Christmas break begins tomorrow, but I have made no arrangements and, where others see a timetable of festivities, I see only a two week reprieve from the nine-to-five-ness that interrupts my freedom to do as I will.

And what is my will?

Though Davinia watches me from the corner of her eye, she keeps her distance. I wonder if she's expecting me to remonstrate with her. This has unsettled the last few days, because really, I'd rather ignore the fact she tried to embarrass me in front of the entire gathered assembly of Parish worthies, to say nothing of our honourable member of parliament. She plotted my demise, and it was only by some miracle I was granted the fleetness of thought that carried me through. But if I say nothing, will she take this as a provocation to try harder next time?

Perhaps I should reason with her.

It's lunchtime, before I spy my chance. Her secretary – the pernickety and ever so slightly scary Mrs Crabtree – has left her post, and the door to Davinia's domain is momentarily unguarded. I slip through unseen and disturb her at her desk. She looks up unperturbed. Sometimes in surprise people reveal their truest selves, which makes me wonder if Davinia is real at all.

"Yes?"

"Could I have a word?"

"A door open word, or a door closed word?"

"Em... door closed I think."

"Then no, I'm busy, as you can see."

"Of course. Sorry for the interruption. I'll be on my way. I just thought I should apologise, if I've displeased you, that's all."

"Nonsense, Richard. How could you possibly have displeased me?"

There is something dangerous in her tone, and in her look. It means anything I say now might only serve to make things worse. I open my mouth, but pause before putting my foot in it, think twice, sigh, nod to her in deference then back away. There is one afternoon of child-minding left, and then I'm free of whatever this is for a while. Why push your luck? I turn away, but she calls me back.

"All right," she says. "Shut the door."

So I close the door, seal myself into that small space with her and wonder how it can be that my very real fear of Davinia serves only to sharpen my desire. Her hair is loose today, a silken curtain lightly brushing her shoulders. Does she only wears it up and tight and schoolmistressy for him? For Blinkhorn? Is that it?

"Sit."

I sit. I wait. I try to read her thoughts.

Her eyes are moving, flickering, bumpety-bumping over the unevenness of her feelings. So she *is* feeling something?

"You did well on Sunday," she concedes. There is a hint of self-reproach which heartens me a little.

"I just about got away with it, I think."

"I deliberately didn't tell you."

"I know."

"Do you know why?"

"Because I hurt your feelings, and you wanted revenge."

"No, not revenge."

"So..?"

"I want you to be frightened of me. I don't want you ever to rest easy, for fear of what other little surprises I might have in store for you."

"But why?"

"It's simple. If you wear the tie, then we can be friends again..."

I was wrong. She *does* think about it. She thinks about it all the time! "Blackmail then?"

"Don't be silly. It's a little game between lovers, that's all."

"That's something we'll never be – lovers – even if I wore it. You could never have feelings for me."

"Lovers in the modern sense then. Don't be so pedantic, Richard. Wear the tie. I know you want to."

Does she really? Or is it that she's supremely confident in the hold she thinks she has over me? Does she think she can have me, whatever my better judgement advises? Does she realise how close she came to having her wish on Sunday, and the added delight of humiliating me by breaking her end of the bargain on account of a more pressing engagement with our right honourable member?

"No, Davinia."

She gives a careless shrug, as if it doesn't matter what I say, or think, and then she changes the subject. "The reading you came up

with on Sunday wasn't the one that was chosen of course..."

"Well, I would have needed to have been a mind-reader to get the right one."

"Yes, though I sometimes wonder if you *are* a mind reader. Anyway, you improvised. Smoothed it over with hardly a ripple. I even had Reverend Whitman in here on Monday saying how well you'd read and would you be willing to do it again."

"Then he's very kind. The thought horrifies me, of course, but I shall do whatever you ask."

She thinks for a moment, "Not everything, apparently." And before I've had time to think about this, she changes tack again: "You haven't told me if you intend to apply for the post of assistant head yet."

"I do intend to apply, yes."

"Don't bother, the post is no longer open."

"Ah. You have someone else in mind?" I'm relieved by this, relieved I was too tardy, because I imagine the job is quite beyond me and I only decided to go for it so she would not be displeased with me.

"No. There is no post. I can manage very well on my own."

"I'm sure you can... then... why?."

"I was throwing you some crumbs from the table, that's all, you understand? But you turned your nose up at them."

"Not at all, Davinia, really. I'm just naturally cautious. I didn't want to be useless to you."

"Well, there we are."

"You consider me a fool then?"

She's wondering perhaps if her arrows are too blunt this morning, and should she sharpen them? "Not a fool, exactly. I'm going to give you another chance."

"Oh?"

"First week back in the New Year, the school will have to manage without me, and I'm asking you to cover. It's not much of a job really – Mrs. Crabtree already believes she can run the place herself without much help from me. And I suspect she'll be too proud to call upon the likes of you for advice, so it should be a quiet week."

"Mrs. Crabtree's a formidable woman. But I doubt she worries you much."

"Everyone can be controlled. It's just a question of understanding

what motivates them – or failing that, what they're afraid of. Anyway... I've been invited to a conference, in London."

I betray a little too much of what I think is my understanding of this not altogether unexpected revelation.

"You smile, Richard?"

"Only because I'm pleased for you. Except I'm guessing London will be a little dreary at this time of year. I'm sure you'll find the conference... stimulating."

She does not understand. She senses I see something she thinks she should see also. "Richard?"

No. I will not explain, and make to leave instead. "I'll do my best not to let you down."

"What is it that you think you know?"

I pause, check my bearings, bite my tongue. One more afternoon, then two weeks off, and what comes after that seems just too far away to be of any importance at all. But what the hell? Go on, say it: "Be careful, Davinia."

She's bemused. "I can take care of myself."

Why do I want to tell her this? For the right or the wrong reasons?

"I've no doubt that you can. But remember: so can Blinkhorn, and he's not on his own."

Now it's her turn to smile. There is a smugness in it. She thinks she sees through me. "You're jealous he took your place on Sunday, aren't you?"

"Of course I am."

Perhaps she does not expect me to admit this, but she knows I'm in love with her, so why deny it? She smiles craftily: "Oh, Richard – I'm so pleased to hear you say that! He's certainly been very attentive these past weeks. What are you going to do about it?"

She thinks this is a game, but something causes me to fear for her. Blinkhorn is a man with the machinery of Government behind him, and for all of her ambitions, Davinia is just a provincial primary school headmistress. She will not be allowed to compromise him.

"Just... well... make sure you get whatever it is you want from him, before you give him whatever it is he wants from you."

"Wants? This is business, Richard. School business."

"I know. You said."

"I'm not meeting with him, if that's what you think. I told you,

it's a conference."

"His idea though?" I've gone too far. I should not be pressing her. It's really nothing to do with me.

"He arranged for the invitation, yes, but it's an official matter: it came through County. Why am I even telling you this?"

She's flustered, her brow furrowed. "He's not like you," she snipes. "He's a busy man... an *important* man. He probably won't even be in town."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll make the effort."

"Richard, you are paranoid and quite possibly insane. And I'm tired of this conversation. I suggest you leave before I remember myself, and that you're just this middle aged *loser* who happens to work for me."

That *was* a sharp one. Oooh! It pierces me, and I'm truly bleeding now as I get to my feet but then my lady adds quickly and softly: "I didn't mean that."

"I deserved it. I had no business pressing you."

Her head is down, papers turning, eyes hidden so I cannot read her, and then again under her breath: "You're *not* a loser. I'm just provoking you. You understand?"

"Yes... quite."

But that's exactly what I am. I've lost everything. However, the position grants one a peculiar perspective, having once been, if not exactly at the top of life's food chain, then at least in the top third of it. And the question I'm asking myself is, what, among the debris, is important enough to consider picking up again, and what should I leave there in the mud, where it fell? Or is none of it worth a damn anyway and whatever I touch I'll just end up making all the same mistakes again?

She flicks her eyes at me, briefly, checking for damage and, dare I say, even hoping not to find any? "See you at church then?" she asks, though it comes out as more of a command.

"Of course."

"Oh, and Richard?"

"Yes?"

"Nice car."

Chapter 21

It's months now since I walked in Durleston. But on the dead days that remain between the solstice and Christmas eve, I walk it every morning, rising at dawn and making my way to the beech tree where I sit and wait in vain for the ghosts to return. Lillian's wrong though: they're too scared. They sense something dark is afoot, and I sense it too.

For now I avoid the path by the cottage, completing my circuit by another way, but I smell its wood-smoke and imagine Lillian warming her toes by a fire, huddled up, perhaps still sickly, waiting for her master, the monster to call.

"Talk to me!"

I am addressing the river, and the old tree, against which I lean. I pick up a pebble, squeeze it in my fist as if to imprint the request, and then I toss it down into the water. Then again. And again.

"Talk to me."

What have I ever stood for? What have I ever stood *up* for? A family perhaps? All gone now. I am no longer required. It was just a passing phase. They would contact me if I were needed. They have my address. I sent it as soon as I had settled in Mill Lane. Perhaps they did not receive it. Perhaps I should get a telephone. No... really, I don't have one.

"Talk to me!"

Durleston is laid bare by winter. There are no secrets here now, no places for the ghosts to hide. There is only daylight through the twisted branches, harsh and clinical, like the light of Davinia's apartment. Even Lillian has deserted me. I strain to catch the jingle of her bonds above the rippling of the Rye, but there is nothing. She is not stalking. Not watching. Perhaps she has gone. The thought troubles me and I feel empty without her, worthless too, that I had not the courage even to keep her safe.

Something stirs.

Lillian?

She speaks: "How shall I answer you?"

I did not hear her coming because she's been here all the time. Silent, watching, hidden among the bare tangle of saplings and so still my mind had not thought to register her as part of reality at all. She emerges now wearing a long riding coat with a cowled hood.

It's his, I'm thinking, an old one, cast off and frayed at the hems. It buries her, but it seems at least he means to keep her dry.

"You're walking again," she observes. "But you're avoiding the house."

"I'm afraid he'll see me."

"I've told you his movements. That's why you come early now. It's me you're avoiding."

"I thought you'd gone. I couldn't feel you any more. I thought he might have moved you."

"Oh? Then perhaps I am slipping away Adam. Perhaps I am more of a ghost now, like the ghosts you talk to here. I would gladly be a ghost for you, if you would let me."

"I don't want you to be a ghost."

"You wish me to be gone instead?"

"Not that either. But I'm afraid you shall become a ghost before ever I make up my mind what it is you are to me."

She laughs, tucks her coat tails under her legs and sits among the roots with me, her back against the old tree, her shoulder touching mine. "Listen to us," she says. "Can we not simply admit that we are pleased to see each other?"

"I think I can admit that much."

"You can? That's progress. I admit it too. See? There – we are friends now."

It feels warm suddenly. I'm not blushing or flushing, or sweating, or tingling. I am comfortable, as if I had lain back in a warm bath.

"This is not just your tree, you know?" she says. "We share it."

"Yes. I've seen your footprints."

"Ah."

"I notice you've not been up to my house recently?"

"No. He's been back. I have more supplies now."

"You could still come, you know?"

"Not any more, Adam."

"He found out?"

"No."

"Then..?"

"You know why. If I came it would be to please you, and because it would please me. I want to, but cannot unless you first take possession of me. Those are the rules." She lifts her cuff, reveals the studded leather binding and the steel ring. The ring is

becoming rusty and has stained her skin. "You must cut these. You know this. I have told you a thousand times."

"Lillian... "

"Hush... I know. Let's not speak of it. Actually, I've been wondering myself if I'll be gone soon."

"Oh?"

"We're behind with the rent. He boasts about it... how he takes advantage of the letting agent. It worries me. I would not like to move. It sounds so strange to you, I know... but I feel safe here."

"Oh?"

"It's you, I think... knowing you are near. You *will* save me Adam. I know you will. And I will save you."

There comes a sizzling sound. Rain is moving up the valley of the Rye. She pulls the cowl over her head in readiness and sits there, quite immune, when the shower hits us. I am not so well protected in my raincoat. She can sit there all day, but I will have to move soon, and I do not want to lose this contact, this warmth, shadowy though it is.

"You offered to show me the house," I remind her.

She turns suddenly and looks at me, something in her eyes that speaks of hope, and I wish I had not seen it, because I can offer her nothing, and all I'm feeling is a mixture of pity and the desire not to be without her, while lacking the courage to actually take her. What she offers me is my soul, but it does not come without a price.

"I think I'd like to see it." I tell her. "I mean... really."

"I could... serve you tea?"

"That sounds very civilised... and I'm sure there would be no harm in it."

She rises then and moves quietly away. I follow, catch up cautiously and then like one abandoning all reason, I fall in step with her. We have never walked together, never shared a step. There is something intimate about it, like putting on someone else's shoes, or putting on their skin, their stride, their feel. She tests me the same way, and we eventually settle on a pace that is slow and lingering, neither of us wanting to hurry the day along, even though the rain is steady now and the bareness of Durleston offers us no shelter.

"I heard you speaking," she says. "I mean before I came. You were asking the ghosts to answer you?"

"Yes."

"And did they?"

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"Sometimes they don't speak. They show me things instead. Pathways open and I follow them. Or sometimes I feel the path I'm following close, and I know then to turn around."

"So... in walking with me now, are you following, or turning around?"

"Both, I think."

"How can it both?"

"Following then... but in following, can I not be turning away from something else?"

The house gives little warning of its presence, even in the bareness of the winter months. And by the time your eye is caught by the white render showing through the gaps in the bare, black trees, the house is upon you. It still frightens me. I see old man Willet with his hammer growling and gurning, and my legs turn to jelly. My heart is cracking against my ribs as we come up to the untidy boundary – the vagueness of its broken down fences, overrun by the garden as it meets the forest coming in the other direction. How can a place that has frightened you for so long harbour anything benign?

I'm standing still now, but she is moving on, oblivious for a moment, then looking back to see what the matter is, she pauses. Her lips come together and she smiles. I read sympathy and understanding, or is it guile? How I wish I could trust her. She holds out her hand – not stretched out urgently, fingers splayed and grasping, but relaxed and slightly turned as if to receive my own hand, to gently coax, to seduce, rather than drag. If I enter into this pact it must be of my own volition.

"Come, Adam," she says, then pushes open the shoddy front door and slips inside.

I can stand there for ever and let the rain wash me away. I'm already soaked – trousers clinging to my legs with chill fingers. I must go inside, if only to get dry, and warm again. I brace myself and venture so far as to step inside the doorway.

The house is not what I expect. I am expecting... what? something dark, dank, ruined, mildewed, rotten - like the outside? I am expecting the smell of boiled cabbage, the feel of cobwebs on my skin, the sound of water dripping into puddles of ruin. But it's

dry. And bare. The bareness of it surprises me. Bare floorboards, pale and polished. Bare walls, but painted in pale colours. It's clean... and bright! My God - it... welcomes me, it bids me enter!

There are two rooms I can see into: a living room and I suppose a parlour, on opposite sides of the hallway, but I can see no furnishings in them. How can that be? There is nothing to sit on. A low table, a wood-burner, candles... I see a rug, and cushions. She sits on cushions, then, on the floor?

I pull off my mucky boots, set them on the step then, intrigued now, I enter more deeply into this strangeness.

She has taken off her coat and stands before me in a floral print skirt and a sweater, both thin and cheap and too small for her. I can see her hip-bones and the imprint of her nipples. She should dress better. I would dress her better if she were mine.

What? What are you thinking?

"You are surprised, Adam?"

"Yes. It's... not what I expected."

"You mean clean?"

I'm ashamed that this is exactly what I mean.

"Yes."

"I could not live in a dirty house. And he would be angry if I let it get that way."

"No furniture, though?"

"Some... though not perhaps what you expect to see in an English house?"

"No."

"You prefer your three piece suite? Your dining table and your double divan mattress?"

"I hadn't really thought. I don't know."

"Let me show you. Come."

The kitchen is to the rear, small windows looking out across an unkempt patch of sapling infested lawn. There is also a small and basic bathroom. It's plain and clean, not mildewed and stinking as I had feared it might be – not because I had thought her incapable of maintaining such cleanliness as this, but because what I am seeing here does not look like a prison at all. It is some kind of... sanctuary. She begins on the stairs, but I hesitate. "It's all right," she says. "I want to show you, that's all."

"I don't want to see anything... you know... sort of... personal."

"It's all right. I don't want you to see that either."

There are four rooms upstairs, all leading off a broad landing. One of these she keeps hidden, the door firmly shut and her body between it and me at all times. I suppose this is where she keeps things, paraphernalia, equipment... The other rooms I am free to inspect. Two are completely bare, but freshly decorated, as if awaiting furniture. The other is her bedroom, but no bed – she sleeps in a wide hammock. I am puzzled by this, and not sure what I'm looking at. It's actually a garden hammock, wide enough for two – I have seen them in the garden centres. There are pillows and a duvet nestled tidily in the middle. There are two chests, but again no furniture, no dressing table, no mirror.

"It's more comfortable than it looks," she tells me.

"Yes... I'm sure it's very comfortable."

I'm aware of course that I'm looking at her bedroom, that she has no qualms about showing me this intimate space. So I can only guess what lies beyond the other door, the one she keeps shut and is now securing with extra firmness by keeping her hands upon the handle behind her back, knuckles white with anxiety. Does she expect me to take her by surprise and burst in? She's really nervous about this, wondering if I will ask her about it, but already I think I know it will upset me, that it will confront me with an image of her that I would rather avoid.

"Tea?" I remind her.

She looks relieved, and nods. "Yes... then perhaps it will stop raining, and I can show you the garden?"

"Lovely."

"Do you like this house, Adam?"

"It's... much better than I thought. Yes."

"I'm pleased you like it."

The kitchen is a remnant of the 1970's. It has worktops and cupboards, and a wood-burning Aga, because there is no electricity. There is a diesel generator in an outhouse, but it does not generate enough power to cook with. It charges old submarine batteries that are now all but shot, and which provide only sufficient power for lighting.

"But since I do not exist," she explains. "He forbids me to use the generator anyway. Too noisy, you see? I can only run it, when he's here."

There is a kitchen table, but no chairs. She makes tea in a clean, white porcelain pot, assembles it with teacups on a tray, milk,

sugar, and little spoons, then carries it into one of the front rooms, where she lays it in the centre of the rug and we sit cross legged upon cushions like Bedouin.

"I have made it the English way for you."

"Perfect, though any way is fine."

She gives me a searching look, then hides herself in the pouring out of the tea. "You mean you really don't mind? Or you no longer know what it is that pleases you?"

"I don't know. Can we really find pleasure in such small things? Or should we not just let them go."

"Ah... speak like Buddhist now? They will be angry at your church, I think, to hear you speak like Buddha."

I like it when she teases me.

"But Adam... to find no pleasure in anything? To expect no reward in life at all? Is this a virtue, or is it a reaction to something? A retreat from too many disappointments perhaps?"

She might have something there, but I'm afraid I'll give too much away by answering. She is able to see the truth in anything, no matter what I actually say.

"You are unwell again, Adam?"

"I'm managing."

"Not drinking?"

"No. Drinking makes it worse."

"Let me serve you. Let me make you well again. I *can* make you well."

"You have enough problems of your own, Lillian, without worrying about mine."

"In serving you, I would be solving all of my problems."

"I don't understand how you can think like that. Even if I were to take possession of you, my first command would be for you to set yourself free of any man, including me, but most of all from any kind of submissive servitude at all."

"Then that would be the one command I would not obey. You would have to be very cruel to make me even consider it. Have I misjudged you? You would not be a cruel master would you, Adam?"

"I... I could never set myself above a woman, that's all."

"You would let her rule you, then?"

I hesitate.

"Ah, you prefer a woman to be commanding?"

"No... no. Equal."

"Is your girlfriend commanding, or equal, Adam?"

"I've told you, she's..."

"I know. She's not really your girlfriend. You have not made love then? She will not let you? No... wait. The opposite. She *commands* it,... but you are unsure? Afraid? Oh... Adam, I see it! But you must not do this thing."

"Lillian, for one who claims to be submissive, you are very... probing."

She smiles. "If you ever possess me, you may command me to stop probing. I can pretend things very well."

"I would never want you to stop."

"Then you need never command it. But am I right?"

"You are remarkably intuitive. I could never keep any secrets from you."

"You have no secrets Adam. They are all written in your face, your eyes, your movements. If others do not see these things it is because they do not want to. But am I right?"

"Yes."

She gasps, covers her mouth with her hands – but seems to take pleasure in my dilemma. "She has found you out? She has taken you by surprise? Oh... poor Adam."

"Yes. But you mustn't say anything. It's..."

"Who would I tell? But it's what? This thing she commands you to do? Secret? No one must know of it?"

"It would be... inappropriate. People might not approve. It would be bad for her position, if anyone found out."

She's quiet, thinking about all of this. She's probed and pushed and finally winkled out the truth. And then I sense the pleasure in her fade. "This is the thing you are turning from? You turn from her and follow me?"

"It's not as simple as that."

"I know this."

When Lillian is quietly pleased, the silence is accompanied by the serenity of her smile. When she is displeased, the silence wears a frown. She grows quiet now and nods gloomily to herself. Then...

"The tie," she whispers. "It was a signal to her. This was her command. You had me choose. I chose the right one, you said. Then I did not send you to her bed, Adam."

"You're right about the tie, and you didn't send me to her."

"Why make me choose? That was cruel."

"Only if you knew. You didn't know."

"But Adam I shall always find you out. That's who I am, you see?"

She brightens, but it's forced, and I do not trust this return to easiness. I am on my guard.

"It's stopped raining," she tells me. She rises now and moves to the window. "I'll show you the garden. It's badly over run. But with imagination, you might see how it used to be in olden days."

There are lawns to the front, now unrecognisable and entirely colonised by clumps of coarse meadow grass. To the rear it is the same. The boundary is overrun by saplings from the surrounding forest, like a slow motion invading army, leaping the broken down fence. But there is an openness to the back, a break in the dense canopy of Durleston, an oasis of light and a clear space running down to the Rye, the remains of a once elegant garden table and chairs, now rotted and tangled with brambles. She has not put on her coat and stands in the ruins of the garden, embracing herself against the cold. I remember it is not that long since she was unwell.

"You can see it, Adam?"

"See what?"

"That it has... potential? Is that the right word?"

"Yes. It needs some work, but it could be very pleasant here."

"Will you do it then, I wonder?"

She smiles. There is a promise of something in it: her admiration, the reward of her favour. She's what? Flirting with me?

"We should go back inside. It's cold," I tell her.

"But will you do this work?"

"I don't understand, Lillian."

She lowers eyes in defeat, has one last try at honesty. "Adam, please... help me."

"Then come and stay with me, up at the house. Stay as long as you want. I don't care. I won't give you away. It's that simple."

"Nothing is that simple."

"Yes it is. Stay here and you're in danger. All the time. It would make no difference if I came to you. He's stronger and more dangerous than me. I could not protect you from him, here."

"Yes, you could. Don't you see? You are a good man. You have nothing to hide. He has much to hide and would be afraid of losing

it by drawing attention to himself." A tear is glistening, running from the corner of her eye. She senses it, resents it, and brushes it away.

I feel worthless. Lillian seems always to draw the focus down upon my inadequacies. And Davinia? She does it too, but where Lillian expects me to be strong, Davinia would prefer me to remain weak, for then she might go on comfortably despising me. And weakness is always the easier of the two.

"I don't know how to protect you here," I tell her. "He might have a lot lose, but so do you. One phone call from him and the officials would be down here with police and goodness knows what. The only way is to move somewhere else. I'm not saying they'll never catch up with you, but if you leave here, it'll at least buy you some time."

She's not listening.

"Look," I tell her, "it's quiet down here... but it's not secret. People walk their dogs. There's a farm not a mile away. Others will have seen you, besides me."

She turns away and begins to walk back to the house.

"Lillian, wait. What if... what if I did as you say, cut those things from you, possessed you, then I could command you?"

"No, Adam."

"No? I thought that was what you wanted."

"You are thinking you could command me to leave this house, in exchange for yours, or some other place."

Yes,... that's exactly what I'm thinking.

"But I will not go from here," she says.

"Lillian, you've been... abused here. The house bears a stain for you."

"No. I like this house. I do not want to leave it."

"So... you want me to possess you, but you will not obey me in two things: one that you be free, and two, that you leave this house?"

"I cannot leave. Not yet. Perhaps one day, but in my own time and on my own terms."

"Lillian?"

"Adam, you are very kind, but if I came to your house I would be a prisoner in it, never able to venture out of it for fear of being seen, always tiptoeing around for fear your neighbours will hear me. Here, there is some privacy, the chance of air, of green... do

you see? I am a ghost in the forest. And you are wrong: others do not see me. You see me only because I allow you to."

"He could come and take you away any time, hide you somewhere else, lose you in the depths of some other part of the world. He decides, Lillian. He decides your fate, if you stay here."

"No. Not any more. I have the final say."

"You do?"

"Yes, I've realised it's very simple. If he tried to take me away from here, from you, I will kill myself."

"You don't mean that."

She gives a shrug. It doesn't matter if I believe it or not, she's saying. Her mind is made up and it really is that simple She smiles, asks me with chilling casualness if I would care for more tea, then turns and goes back inside.

Chapter 22

Morning. Christmas Eve. The parishioners of Marsden are busy with their festive preparations, and the church is quiet. It has a high ceilinged hollowness to it, quite unlike other Sundays. I feel exposed, and conspicuous beside Davinia. There is no one else in the pew – just the pair of us together. We must look like a couple, and I am feeling all eyes upon us.

The congregation is outnumbered by the choir, but still I'm wondering how indiscreet this is, that we each show up – dare I say religiously – each week, when the others ebb and flow. Does this not suggest we each have an interest in something other than the singing of hymns and the good reverend's sermons? And surely by now the whole of Marsden knows Miss Barkwell and Mr Hunter had lunch together at the Duke of York Hotel? And I wonder if they stayed the night? Saucy, dirty, outrageous... and wouldn't it be good if any of it were true?

I suspect Davinia cares little, and so long as things are deniable, the good people of Marsden can think what they like. She is cool and calm, and seems quietly absorbed by the service this morning, though I doubt she could answer questions on it. She has looked at me only once, when I arrived, and even then did not seem to care that I was not wearing the tie, that I was not wearing a tie at all. Instead, as soon as I sat beside her, she half turned away, as if to present me with her shoulder, but at the same time she crossed her legs and has been slowly rotating her foot with a curious rhythm. There's something erotic in this, but it could be my imagination.

She's wearing black stockings, and black strappy shoes. At least my heart insists, as usual, they *are* stockings. The shoes have long heels and are closed at the toes, but cut as if on purpose to show their décolletage, which she knows is my particular weakness, and she taunts me with it.

What?

You're wondering perhaps how I could have been with Lillian only yesterday, sitting shoulder to shoulder in the depths of Durleston, and glad for it? You're wondering how I could have turned my steps away from Davinia, towards Lillian, and now turned them back again. You're wondering how I could have listened while Lillian described her terrible resolve to end her life,

and yet not be with her now?

Actually, I'm not wondering about Lillian at all. I am trying to forget her. All I'm thinking of is my shirt. The cotton has a firm, crisp feel to it. The French cuffs protrude an inch below the sleeve of my jacket and show off my cuff-links - plain lozenges of 18 carat gold. It's open at the neck, portraying an air, I hope, of calculated indifference, of casualness, of cool collectedness. Other thoughts are trying to get inside my head, mainly what it would feel like to have Davinia's fingers working the buttons of this shirt, tiptoeing their way into me with the same cool resolve she displays in the conduct of all her business.

I cannot help this, and do little to discourage such thoughts in the hope that they will distract me even more from the thought of that path to Durleston, and to Lillian's door. There is a madness in it, like grasping a red hot poker. You know it's going to burn you. Who in their right mind would want to do it? Yet there remains something compelling about her. What is that? Is it confidence? A certain fatalistic knowing?

I take a breath, try to shake these creeping thoughts away, take out my pocket bible, as if to shield myself from them. Davinia senses my agitation, eyes me sideways, crosses her legs and I see the dimple of a suspender on her thigh. Stockings! I knew it. Damn-it, Davinia, I am yours. Take me. Rescue me from being burnt by encasing me in your shallow ice.

Women I have known extol the virtues of tights - how practical they are! How so much easier than stockings! They humour their men on occasion by treating them with stockings and suspenders, but they really think no more of sex than this – as an impracticality, an inconvenience to be occasionally got over. But a woman who wears stockings deliberately, by preference, is, I imagine, celebrating her sexuality, and there is nothing more erotic for a man to suppose this is the case, because she might also be thinking of sharing her sexuality with him. Forgive my generalities here. I don't intentionally wish to appear ridiculous. I merely present to you my state of mind, and trust you will forgive me if I don't try to explain myself too much. After all, who among us truly knows himself?

Where was I?

Heavens, Reverend,... this is a long sermon!

Davinia does not always talk to me after Church. Sometimes she

will simply drift away, sometimes hide herself in conversation with the governors, or a parent, and I am too proud to let her see me loitering on the off chance of a word from her. Yet my Sundays are all the more dull if she does not grace me with such an intimacy.

"How soon before they find us out do you think?"

The sermon is over, and the closing prayer, and I am standing in fresh air at last, my hand on the door handle of my car. I am about to pull it open and sink into the sanctuary of its interior. I'm thinking I should take a long drive somewhere, clear my head. Her heels are clicking along the pavement, still some distance away and her words seem indiscreet. What was it she said?

"Find us out?"

"That we're both imposters." She tips her head back to the church. "In there."

Is she granting me a morsel of fellowship? We are both the same in this, yes, but unalike in virtually every other way.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Davinia."

"Oh, come on, Richard. You're no more religious than I am – and that's not very much."

Is she joking with me? No. Davinia has no sense of humour, remember? "If you think that, why did you appoint me as your Religious Education Coordinator?"

She's smiling now. "Have you no sense of irony, Mr Hunter?"

"What? You're joking!"

"Not at all."

"You really *are* something!"

She seems to approve of this.

"But I suspect we're not the only imposters in there," I tell her.

She sighs. "No, but at least we can be honest with ourselves about it."

"Well, religion is a private matter. Whether a man is sincere or merely paying lip-service, it's something between himself and God."

She looks at me strangely. "Richard, is your role beginning to corrupt you?"

"My role?"

"As God's representative at Marsden C. of E. Primary School. Are you beginning to *get* religion?"

She's making me nervous. Does she want me to *get* religion or not? "I don't think so." I tell her. "I do my job, follow the curriculum, like everyone else. Religion's easy. It's spiritual matters

that are more difficult."

I catch myself.

It was Lillian who told me this.

It's a cold day. Grey. A flat light, lending to the stained red brick and the grey buckled pavement a tired dullness - or perhaps I'm simply nosediving back into depression. Meanwhile, she stands there, tall and smooth and bright, like an icicle, a splash of colour in the paisley patterned wrap around her shoulders. She would brighten any room, any mood, any season, I'm thinking. How could one harbour depression when she's around? She would simply not permit it. She catches me looking at her, likes it, I think.

"Tell me," she says. "Is there a Christmas tree at your house?"

A Christmas tree? There is not even a clean carpet. "No."

"Nor mine. A turkey in the fridge perhaps?"

"Definitely not."

"I'm relived to hear it. Seeing your family then?"

Unconsciously, I manage to give her a look that betrays how much the thought of this wounds me.

"Sorry," she says. "Stupid of me. So what will you be doing then, tomorrow?"

I'm confused. "Tomorrow?"

"It's Christmas day, Richard."

Of course. I knew that!

"I... I suppose I'll be walking... and thinking."

She does not expect this. "Thinking? Hmm, yes, that's you all right – the morose, philosophical type. Well don't think too much. There's never any mileage in it. And you're a depressive too, so it's probably not good for you. We all just end up doing what we feel anyway, no matter how hard and long we think about it."

"Yes."

"Meet me at the Wagon in Ribchester in one hour?"

"Sorry?"

She raises an eyebrow: "Lunch, Richard? It's ages since we had lunch together."

"Yes, but then I remember the last occasion so well."

"All right, but I promise to behave myself this time."

You're wondering why I'm even considering it? Because I *am* considering it. I mean, what's the alternative? Brooding? Thinking? Thinking about Lillian? Wondering if he's come to take her away and she's already lying with her throat cut?

"All right then. But just lunch."

"One hour."

Ribchester is on the road to the Dales, the A59. It's a pretty village snuggled into a bend of the Ribble, one of Lancashire's big rivers. There was a Roman crossing here, and a fort. Now there is a museum and pretty walks, and archaeology.

It takes me forty minutes. I find the Wagon, find her Jaguar, park beside it and enter the pub uncertainly. There is a coolness to the air, a millstone grit sort of darkness and a hardness to the light. Pubs are struggling these days. Alcohol served over the bar is becoming prohibitively expensive, smokers are banished to shiver in their shelters outdoors, and big screen TV's are so cheap you don't need to go to a pub to enjoy one any more.

It's quiet. The barmaid looks up as if in surprise. She's an attractively buxom lass, and her welcoming smile seems genuinely pleasant, but I am distracted by my mistress who awaits me in a corner, a queenly haughtiness about her. And when I sit down, she leans closer, rests her elbow on the table, rests her chin upon her hand and says: "I *will* have you Richard."

I'm dismayed by this. "You promised you'd behave yourself."

"I lied."

"I don't get it – I mean I'm sure I'm not your... type."

"I don't have a *type* Richard. You were interested, and naturally that makes you interesting to me, and besides I always get what I want."

"But I'm old and dusty, Davinia. I'm a morose philosopher... a depressive. You're a corporate..."

"Tart?"

"Goddess."

"Are you impotent? Is that it?"

She's trying to provoke me, but I fancy I have the measure of her now. "Not physically. Emotionally perhaps."

"That's all right then. Your emotions are of no concern to me."

"I still don't get it: you have a thing for older men?"

"You're not that old, Richard. Stop playing the *old* card, it's becoming tedious."

"Okay, but then what?"

She's puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Afterwards! What comes afterwards?"

"Who knows? Who cares?"

"We work together. I work *for* you. If I were the head, and you the inexperienced teacher, this would be an abuse of my position. It would be... sexual harassment of the highest order."

"Not the highest order, surely? I can think of other things that would be much naughtier."

I close my eyes. She is offering me everything, except the one thing I want, but that's impossible, a thing that might not exist at all outside of my own imagination, a thing born of loneliness and the desire for just one meaningful connection in my life. Were I a younger man of course I would have taken her before now – taken her that first time at her flat, when she invited me, careless of the consequences, and by now most likely already reaping my just deserts. I take a breath, my heart aching, and thinking that anything is better than this – even sitting at home alone.

There is Christmas Muzak coming over the speakers. A dull little tree over by the bar, and Christmas cards tacked up all over the place. Davinia ventures to nosey inside of one on the panelling behind her. It's blank. They all are. They are a job lot, perhaps even purchased in last January's sales of unwanted tat. She wrinkles her nose at the insincerity of it.

"So... Davinia. How do you know this place?"

"Let's not."

"Not what?"

"Do the small talk thing. I could tell you it was where my husband used to bring me on our dates in the dim and distant. But it would mean nothing to you. You would nod, then instantly forget it."

"I don't think I would. You misjudge me."

"To remember it would be worse. It would mean you were pretending to get to know me. And I wouldn't want that either. I'm not for knowing, Richard, not for loving. Ah, but I'm forgetting: you think you're in love with me. You think it somehow makes a difference? But it doesn't."

Has she summoned me here only so she can stick pins in me? Is she the cat playing with the mouse, before she kills it? She glances away now, hides her eyes, covers her regret. Sometimes she does not mean to be like this. There is an aggressive streak in her, but it is a defence. For what? Does it cover a deeper vulnerability. "I'm sorry," she says. "Any other man would have slapped me. I... I don't think you ever would, which is why I pretend to enjoy being so

cruel to you. You must never think for a moment I really mean any of these things. It's just a game, you see?"

"Davinia... why am I here?"

"Lunch?"

"Try again."

"Because I have three days to kill. Then I have family to see for the New Year – dreadful bore, but it's sometimes nice to feel connected, even to people who get on your nerves, and still treat you like a child. Then I'm off to London for the conference. So,... returning to those three days: I'm lonely Richard, and you must be too."

"You said you would not speak of this."

"I know, but I *have* been thinking about it. And so have you."

"Thinking only how bad an idea it would be."

"You don't mean that. I see you looking at me all the time."

"I do not..."

"It's all right, I like it. But why go on dreaming when in another hour, you could be unbuttoning this blouse and satisfying your curiosity."

Oh,... Davinia. For pity's sake!

"Because it would mean nothing to you. We could make love. Once, twice maybe... then your curiosity about me would be satisfied. You'd move on, and I'd be left feeling humiliated."

"Possibly, but it would cure you of your love for me."

"No. That's not how love works. I would hate you. But it would be the kind of hatred that was always ready to turn back into love. All it would take would be a smile, or a kind word, or an hour of loneliness for me to start hoping once more that I might win your love."

"Surely then, a part of you is thinking you might persuade me to love you if you spend time with me. True love would not give up on such an opportunity."

I'm bewildered. I'd be happy at my time of life never to become entangled with a woman again, yet here I am, in a turmoil caused by two of them, and I can have neither. They are both, in their different ways, just too strange.

"A younger man might jump at your invitation," I tell her. "But I'm older. I'm a Romantic and but also realist."

"How can you be a Romantic *and* a realist?"

"Because only the Romantic sees the world for what it truly is,

its shallowness, its meaninglessness, and rejects it. The Romantic seeks meaning instead in the aesthetic, in the contemplation of beauty... or in the sublime."

"The sublime?... Oh, dear me, you're a lost soul, Richard."

"That may be true."

She picks up a menu, consults it, then sets it down impatiently. "I'm getting *really* hungry," she says, then rises and smooths her skirt. "I'll be waiting for you at the flat."

I do not walk out with her. We are not connected. Not for us the small-talk, and the cosy arm in arm. I consider a stiff drink, but I'm driving and the cops are twitchy at this time of year, so I take a deep breath instead, steady myself, wait until I see her pulling out onto the road, then return to my car and pray I have the strength not to follow her.

Chapter 23

I have bought only one Christmas present. It's a silk scarf, a fine fashionable thing in reds and golds, a gift for a young lady, and I present the lady with it now. It was wrapped in the shop and therefore looks even finer as a bound gift, and the lady receives it with a blush.

"Mr Hunter, *really,* you shouldn't have!"

My father is sleepy and has not come down from his room. I do not want to disturb his rest, so I content myself with a game of draughts in the lounge with a gentle old dear called Cynthia, whom no one visits. I listen to the life story of this former land-girl and secretary to the M.D. of the firm of Wallace and Winstanley of Preston. And in the meantime, she wins every game because there is a subtlety to draughts I have yet to grasp.

I know!

I might have been with Davinia, lying in the cool, clinical light of her apartment, instead of sitting in the stupefying heat of this place. For myself I claim to have had no conscious role in the decision. It was my car that delivered me here of its own accord, as if it knew better than me the stupidity of any other action. But Davinia will be cross, and she will punish me. I feel cowardly and perversely frustrated, as usual, that I am not with her now – not being a *man* for her, by fucking her brains out. But I'm told such men are in plentiful supply, so I'm sure she'll have no trouble filling that particular vacancy.

God, how I hate her right now!

I see Chelsea, who I suspect is really the object of my visit, and offer her the gift. It's a little improper perhaps, but there is not a strictness about these things and she is able to accept it graciously, beautifully, in a way that warms my heart.

"It's just a little thank you," I tell her, embarrassed now. "I mean for all you've done, for all you do... for my father."

"It's my job, Mr Hunter. We all do the same here. It's just that it's always my shift when you come around."

She's being modest. The other ladies are kind, they smile, and they speak gently, but they have not quite the same angelic demeanour as Chelsea. It's the romantic in me, the contemplation of something I see in her that others do not. No,...you're leaping ahead

too far; even in my wildest imagination, Chelsea is too young to be my lover - I have made her my daughter instead – to replace perhaps the one I have already as good as lost.

Then I return home late, having lingered for as many more games of draughts as Matron will permit. And now I'm turning the key, dreading the dingy emptiness of this place, and hoping to find Lillian curled up somewhere, waiting for me. But the house is empty. She will be alone in Durleston. He will not come for her tonight, nor tomorrow – he will be with his family, in whatever part of the world he calls home. Christmas is not the time for mistresses or pleasure slaves. It is the time for bound obligation, and I suppose even criminals have those. Still, I cannot go to Lillian, because she is demanding I take responsibility for something I have always shirked, and seem intent on shirking still.

In the morning, I try not to look at the house, even as I wake up inside of it. I pull on my clothes and leave it. I have a new trash novel I borrowed from the lounge of the care home last night. I also have a camping stove, and a tin of soup. Merry Christmas, you might say, but really this day is like any other to me, and the emptiness I feel is something that would have come upon me anyway, regardless of the season. But as always with these moods I find in them the potential for a transformation, if you can only muster the courage to look them in the eye.

The bivouac is holding up remarkably well. A minor repair with sticky tape, and it's as good as new. The day is not cold, and a small fire is all I need to make things comfortable. By Mid-morning, I have given up on the novel because it tries to be romantic but fails spectacularly, losing itself instead in a fog of sick-making sentimentality. Then I have moved through the phase of subconsciously, and then consciously desiring Lillian's company, of preferring the mystery of her, to the base arousal of Davinia. And finally I have abandoned all thought in favour of simply staring into the flames, tossing on the occasional bit of wood to keep the fire alive. Then I hear the dog.

Dogs are stupid.

I wonder how they survived in the wild. They are hardly the supernaturally stealthy hunter, like the cat. They bark. They can send an entire forest under cover. I heard the bloody thing coming a mile away, a Cairn Terrier – not an unfriendly beast, just playful. The thing with dogs though is their uncanny sense of smell. To a

human-being the bivouac and my presence in it are invisible, but the terrier finds me like a homing missile, and its jolly barking will bring its owner of course. I hear him now, scrunching through the undergrowth with all the finesse of an elephant. I therefore lead the leaping little dog out of the belly of the wood, so as not to compromise my hide-away, and there I meet him.

He wears a warm coat over a farmer's dungarees, and his bright red face peers out from under the brim of a furry cap. "Mr Hunter?"

Strange. I do not know him. "Yes?"

"Sorry.... get down Kim. "

"It's okay, he's doing no harm."

I recognise him now – or rather I am able to compute his identity. He's the farmer who shoots other people's dogs, or rather the son of the same, younger brother to Elizabeth, former ghost, and Davinia-look-a-like, now living in Australia. His name is William, who is in turn father of John – one of my rare, intelligent, and impeccably well behaved children.

"Out for a walk?" he asks me.

"Yes."

"Mind you don't get lost." He's smiling, good-naturedly. He has no front teeth and this ages him. He's younger than me, but looks much older.

"Don't worry, I was brought up round here," I say. This surprises him. "My father is James Hunter. He lived on Marsh lane, until quite recently."

He does not know my father, but pretends he does. He is seeking kinship and I find this surprising, though not unwelcome because I lack sympathetic male acquaintances. "He's in Marsden Hall now." I explain.

"I'm sorry Mr. Hunter. I didn't take you for a native."

"Well, I've been away for a long time. My accent's probably gone a bit funny. Lancashire and California make for a peculiar mix."

He laughs, but does not understand.

"How's your Elizabeth going on? The last I heard she was off to Australia?"

He's surprised I know this, and the fact that I know it seems to place me within his circle of trust. "She's well, thanks." And then: "Do you see much of yon mon, renting Dur'ston Cottage?"

Ah! Warning bells are ringing now. What does he know of Durleston cottage? What has he seen?

"Not much," I tell him. "Sometimes his car's there of an evening, but I don't think he's living there all the time. Do you know him?"

William shakes his head. "Quare bugger," he says."And there's a woman too. Dark, like."

Thinking quickly now: "Asian girl, you mean? Yes. We've spoken. She seems unwell. Likes it quiet."

He tips his head back as if he understands. "Ah..." and then: "Gone to ruin, hasn't it? It's a pity. It were a grand owd place in its day."

He's fantasising. In his day it was owned by an equally reclusive and dangerously insane paedo-phobe. Anyway, Durleston Cottage had been every bit as run down in Willet's day as it is now. I am hoping William is not a Nationalist. He did not use derogatory language to describe Lillian's obvious foreignness, but he harks on about a glory day that never was, and this makes me suspicious of him.

Glory days are defined in rosy-spectacled retrospect by Nationalists. But I remind myself he's also a farmer, and farmers as a rule are less likely to be opposed to mass influxes of cheap labour drawn from poorer countries. He might as easily offer Lillian a job harvesting potatoes, as betray her to the authorities. I wonder about this. Picking potatoes might not be so bad. At least it would be less dangerous than what she's doing now.

"Difficult in winter though," I say – a picture of Lillian crossing my mind, frozen to the marrow, muddy boots and trouser legs, shivering as she picks crops out of the wind-blasted, frost bitten fields.

"Aye, but we don't gerr'um like we used to, eh? And I'm sure the place could be made decent, like – it just needs a bit of tidying up."

He's trying hard to be old, I'm thinking: glory days, warm summers, hard winters. They never existed. My only concern is whether or not this man is dangerous to Lillian.

"Well," he says. "We'll be on our way. Come on Kim."

I watch him go, then return quietly to the bivouac. There is something portentous in this. Nothing can stay the same for ever – no matter how balanced the situation appears. There will always come along an element to unbalance it.

The fire would have died by now, except there is a cowled figure crouched there, feeding wood into it. I say nothing, but sit beside her, take the can of soup from my bag and show it to her. She gives

a nod, so I open it. Lunch time.

There is a quiet kinship between us as it boils.

"Merry Christmas, Lillian," I tell her.

She barely moves her head in acknowledgement. "Merry?" she says. "I think we are both a long way from being merry, Adam."

I ask if she overheard anything of my conversation with William.

She nods. "You were right; others have seen me. I thought I'd been careful."

"You are careful," I tell her. "But he's a native, as I am. It grants us a certain kind of insight."

"My time here is coming to an end then."

I prefer not to answer this.

"Who is Elizabeth?" she asks.

"Oh... just an old ghost. I haven't seen her in thirty years."

"Old girlfriend?"

"Ha! If only."

"Is that regret in your tone?"

"Regret, no... cynicism possibly."

"Ah... that's much worse."

"How so?"

"Because while it's healthy to feel regret at a missed opportunity, it is not so healthy to be cynical about the fate that keeps you apart."

"Why not? If we can't rant at fate, who are we to blame?"

"Only ourselves, Adam. We make our own fate, we cook it from a mixture of ingredients, from the things we are and the things we lack."

"You're saying you brought your situation on yourself?"

"Ultimately, yes."

"Then you have more reason to be cynical than I."

"No... there is a purpose in it. Unlike you, I understand this, I yield to it. You on the other hand do not understand it, and therefore cannot see the wisdom in yielding to it."

"But I'm fine now. I'm working again."

"You are clearly not *fine*, Adam, or you would not be sitting here, waiting for me."

"I wasn't waiting for you. I was..."

"Tell me... is your mother living?"

"What? No..."

She nods sagely "Then it is the forest that nurtures you. It is the

forest you have returned to for love and comfort."

"Lillian, you're trying so hard to be mysterious, but really all this... this psychoanalysis... you'd be better turning it on yourself."

"It's not psychoanalysis. I have no need of your Mr Freud, thank you. These are merely folk tales that I draw upon. You will find in your folklore a story that explains every situation. It's just that you English have forgotten your own stories, swapped them for the vapid fallacy of boy meets girl and lives happily ever after. Though since you mention it, your Mr Freud might suggest you have a Mother complex. He might also tell you it's time you let her go, because you are a big boy now."

I'm laughing, because she looks so serious as she tells me all of this... "And in this mad dream of myself, where the forest is my mother, what, might I ask, are you doing in it."

"I am doing nothing – because you refuse to let me. And you refuse because you are afraid of me. I am the hole in your soul. I am what you do not know. I am what you think you should be afraid of, and what all good mothers warn their sons against. But trust me Adam, until you have accepted me, released me into yourself, your fate will never lead you back to Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth? But she's married, she probably has ten kids by now."

"You are being too literal, and evasive I think."

I think so too... but only because she's scratching away at something sensitive, something a little too close to home. I try to change the subject: "Come up to my house for a bit, eh?"

"Adam... how often shall we discuss this?"

"Just for today – you could,... bathe."

"Bathe?"

"Yes,..."

"Why? You would like to see me naked? I can undress for you now if you wish, but I think you would find my chains ugly."

"No... that's not it..."

"Then what?"

"It would give me pleasure to have you bathe at my house, that's all. You make my house feel... not so empty. Worth living in. I imagine I could live anywhere if you were there too."

There is something triumphant in the smile with which she greets these words. But also, as ever, something of the seductress. "Mother again, Adam. Have you ever been married? Was your wife a mother for you too? Did she wash your underpants and iron your

shirts?"

"All right, all right... I get the picture, but I think you're wrong. Anyway you say you want to serve me? Is that not itself a motherly thing? Would you not just be making things worse for me by indulging my complex, by reinforcing it?"

"No. A man does not own his mother, Adam – rather it is the other way round I think. No... to own a slave is also to own the responsibility. The forest holds you prisoner. It will dissolve you back into the earth like these dead leaves it you let it. If you wish to escape it you must accept the need to own me."

"I could never *own* you Lillian."

"Because you do not want the responsibility?"

"I think I've proved myself capable of responsibility. I've been married for twenty years, seen two children into the world. It's not me who rejected them. They just saw the world differently and rejected me. No. I could never own you because it would be indecent. That's all."

"It's only indecent if the woman is unwilling. And I would be very willing for you. Does the thought not intrigue you. Does it not stir you to think that you might command me to do *anything*?"

"You mean sex? Sex is no use to me, Lillian. I'm like a man in the desert – sex to me these days is like... turning up a bottle of whisky, when what you need is water. Sex is... insulting. What I need is love. Can I command you to love me?"

"No, but you can command me to trust you, and I will do it with all my heart. To stand a chance of love, you must first open your heart and trust *me*. I know you're afraid to do that. After all, what man in his right mind would throw his lot in with a woman in my position? Truly, it would be foolish of you to trust, because I could never offer you a future that stretches much beyond tomorrow – or maybe even less than that. Maybe all I can offer you is *now*. If it's water you seek Adam, you have to trust that you will find it. If you are too careful with your trust, all you will find is one bottle of whiskey after another."

She rises. "Thank you for the soup," she tells me. "You are very kind. But also very close with your trust."

Chapter 24

There are few places I hate more than London. I was obviously never meant to live a city sort of life, but nowadays there are so many of us on this island we have no choice but to gather in such places and share in their filth and their noise. And the cities are growing fat, spilling over the remaining green to merge in to one vast metropolis. I was glad to leave it, glad to return to my quiet corner of the rural north, determined never to set foot in a city again, let alone London.

But they say you should never say never.

I have had the feeling for a while now of a crisis building and had assumed it was related to my confused ambivalence over the meaning and the eerie, ongoing presence of Lillian. For all my talk of making a move, I seem only to have acted by avoiding movement, while in our conversations she seemed to be building, or pushing towards forcing on me a revelation, and beyond which change was inevitable. But while our intuitions are sometimes correct, they do not always see which direction the crisis is coming from.

And it comes from a piqued Mrs. Crabtree who has been ordered into my classroom to fetch me to the 'phone in the school office. "Miss Barkwell for you, Mr Hunter."

It is now only the third afternoon of the new year, but things have been going well – no major incidents at the chalk-face, indeed an atmosphere of relaxed calm in the absence of Davinia who is away on her junket to London. I presume she is by now bored and checking up on us.

So, Davinia. Davinia is in London, and she sounds strange. "Check your mail, Richard." Somewhat terse, I'm thinking, but there is also a tremor in her voice I have not heard before, and I know all is not well.

"Davinia?"

"Do it now. Help me."

She hangs up.

Did she just say *help me*?

I return to the classroom, open up my laptop, and there's a message, sent this morning, to my personal email, not the school portal:

"De Winter Hotel, Knightsbridge. RM 304. Come and get me, Richard. Please!!! D."

It's afternoon playtime. The children are squealing in the yard, so I fire back: "When?"

And she replies instantly:

"Now. Please!!!"

She's sitting, waiting. What's happened?

I tell her: "On my way."

Of course, I must wait until the school day is over, another agonising hour, but then I'm walking home so fast my shins are cracking, and without any preparation I climb into the car, type the hotel's name into the navigation gizmo, and pull away. There's something very wrong.

This is not Davinia punishing me, nor testing me, nor treating me like the dirt under her shoes, nor less luring me into a seedy hotel tryst. Davinia does not use words like "Please" and "Help me". And why call me to the 'phone first, only to direct me to my e-mail? Why not simply tell me on the 'phone? It keeps her feelings secret, that's why. I cannot hear the emotion in her voice, in an e-mail. And with Davinia, even if her heart is breaking, one must never be aware she has an emotional bone in her body.

It's four pm. London is six hours away. I try not to think about this. I do not drive much these days. Fifteen minutes here. Ten minutes there. This is different though: Pitch black on the M6, and southbound for hours on end. It's something I am no longer used to. It is like driving into the depths of hell. M6, M1, M25, hours and hours of it, a kaleidoscope of mesmerising headlamps and stabbing tail-lights. Tiredness. Headache. Madness! Follow the voice on the navigation gizmo! Make the turns. Don't lose your way.

Follow.

Follow.

Is this London, coming up?

Lights.

Traffic.

So far away. So foreign.

Is this really where she wants to be? God help her! London is not a friendly place for cars. Enter and it will charge you. Stop and it will fine you, crush you or have the law upon you. The car park of the Dewinter is underground, and for guests only. Others will be fined, or crushed or prosecuted. But where else do I leave the car?

Security cameras seem to be attached to every pillar, reading registration numbers, reading faces, reading lips.

I park it near an elevator and step out, stiff and aching, and dizzy with fatigue. Of course I cannot enter the elevator without a guest key. So I must navigate the stairway to a door which also cannot be opened without a guest key. So I walk the precarious ramp-way, causing another car to swerve and blare its horn. The driver pokes his finger at me. He does not know me. Why does he think I mean to give offence? Why does he abuse me? Why is London always so angry, and so rude to me?

The top hatted doorman salutes, but I do not read this as politeness. He thinks I'm about to spend five hundred quid for B&B . I could rent Durleston for a month for less than that, and I think it obscene these are the going rates, obscene there are people in my country still able, and willing to afford them. Surely, the County's not footing the bill for this? Not even head teachers are afforded such leeway on their expenses! We are front line public servants, for heaven's sake – not consultants, nor the be-suited inspectorate.

It's him, then. Blinkhorn. He's paid for it, hasn't he? She's given herself to him. Or promised to. Or he thinks she's likely to acquiesce, because she's a provincial school marm with ideas above her station, looking for a leg up, while he's an urbane gent looking for a seedy leg over, and no strings. There have been enough scandals exposed by now to reveal that this how things actually work with these people.

I am charming at the reception desk, but the receptionist is surly, and not enamoured of my half mast tie nor I suspect of my unshaven chin, and my northern accent. Yes... yes, I have a chip on my shoulder. But this is *London*. It does not deserve my magnanimity.

"Ms Barkwell, did you say?" Her accent is disdainful, vague... What else am I supposed to do? Is there a secret code? Is there an unspoken etiquette? Am I supposed to slip her twenty quid?

"She's in room 304."

"And you are?"

I'm forgetting, it does not do to be so passive here. "Ring room 304, and tell Ms Barkwell that Mr Hunter is in Reception and awaits her orders."

Strange language, but the officious tone seems to propel her hand as far as the telephone. Then I am issued a guest pass to the

elevator, and at ten thirty p.m., I am walking into room 304 to find Davinia red eyed and pale, her magnificence crumpled, like the creased silk of her blouse. I try not to think about what this means and instead distract myself by thinking: five hundred quid a night, for *this*?

It's not much of a room. Small, modern, soulless, sweaty, airless, noisy with the aircon and the minibar. It also has "train wreck" written all over it, and all over her. She comes to me, and startles me by putting her arms around my neck. Then she holds her body against me and breathes slowly, gratefully. She feels so light, so frail, so cold and she's trembling slightly. I had not expected this. How can one so slight, be so formidable? But I'm forgetting it's the soul that fills us, and hers has been punctured.

"Thank you, Richard."

I should ask her what the matter is, but I do not. It's not my business. Besides, I think I can guess, She'll tell me if she wants to, but I *should* ask, shouldn't I? I've just driven six hours in the dark, after work to come and get her, and you'd think she'd say why, but she doesn't. And I don't mind. Indeed, I really do not want to have it confirmed.

"Are you packed?"

She nods.

"Your car?"

"Came by train."

"Right. And you're... okay?"

She will not cry. She swallows something down. Grits her teeth. She will *not* cry. She nods slowly.

"Need a doctor perhaps?"

Shakes her head. Emphatic."I just need... someone... to see me home."

I take her bag, she follows me out, to the elevator. I punch the key for the basement and we ride it down together. She stands close, but all I'm thinking is how frightened she looks, how far she has fallen since I last saw her. And the terror of that fall is still in her eyes.

I dare not tell her I am too tired to drive home. It sounds selfish of me to even consider it. The door opens onto the car park and I lead her out to the car. She settles in the passenger seat, reclines it slightly, turns her head away from me and drifts into herself. I reach over, draw the belt across her hips and snap it in place. She's

so thin, so empty, so lost. I'm shocked by it. I want to fold her in an embrace, to comfort her, protect her but she does not register my presence now.

I drive up to the exit ramp, but the way is barred by a plastic barrier arm and a light is flashing at me, ordering me to insert my token, or pay a hundred pound fine. I have no token. But I have a car I don't mind scratching, and the barrier only takes a nudge before it bends uselessly away. Then, I'm punching the go home button on the navigation gizmo, and a cool, calm Englishwoman's voice is telling me to turn left at the junction.

I have just rescued Davinia. I don't know what from exactly, and she has no intentions of telling me. My imagination is as good as yours though, and if I ever see Blinkhorn again I will not be in such a rush to shake his hand – but then I'm forgetting, he's a man who's slow to offer it.

The traffic here is always insanely fast, and thick and rude. The navigation gizmo calls out my lane changes at the last minute and there is never any room to manoeuvre, so I must stop to wait for a gap before I can change lanes. No one ever gives way, so this can be a time consuming process, waiting for a big enough gap. Traffic clogs up behind me, tempers are frayed, horns blare and phallic fingers are jabbed. Davinia stares back, blank eyed at these uncivilised apes. These people want to what? To punish my slowness with their penises? Or are they telling me I *am* a penis? Oh... the world is such a strange place! I'm dizzy - and *so* tired.

I make it out of the City, pick up the M1, then drive as far as the first services – what they call these days the London Gateway. Here I pull in, close my eyes and mutter to her that I must rest a while. She makes no reply, and I remind myself that I was wrong when I told her that London would be dull – London may be many things but it is never dull, regardless of the season one is subjected to it.

M1. M6. How I hate this ribbon of roaring road, this perpetual conveyor of the living dead. I make several stops along the way, nodding for half an hour here an hour there. A toilet stop, a coffee stop, a pork pie stop, but Davinia remains motionless, curled up, eyes half closed, saying nothing, only a half nod or a turn of the head in response to my questions, my asking if I can get her anything, or if she's all right. By Newport Pagnell I've got the message, she's gone into her shell and she isn't coming out.

This is a crisis of unimaginable proportion. But it has nothing to

do with Lillian.

This is Davinia.

Chapter 25

It's six in the morning when we reach Lancashire. It's been raining steadily for four hours, and the world is painted black. I've been driving since tea time the day before, all through the night, and I feel like death. The junction for Southport is coming up.

"The flat?" I ask her.

She gives me a half nod in reply. I've guessed correctly this is where she wants to be. It is her hide-away. No one other than me knows she owns it. But who it is she's hiding from, I can only speculate. It seems ridiculous that Davinia was lured to London for the thoughtless pleasuring of a sleazy politician. I'd had my suspicions of course, but I'd also imagined such an urbane gent would have granted her at least the pretence of a glamorous seduction, rather than simply consuming her in this grotesque way. Perhaps Davinia had thought the same. She deserved no less. What she got of course, she did not deserve at all.

Half an hour later, I'm pulling up on the Marine Drive, still a little before dawn, and heaving her case from the back, then walking her spectral figure to her door.

"You didn't come," she murmurs, as she fumbles with her key.

What? Oh... she's referring to her invitation, before Christmas, I suppose. "No, I didn't come."

"Wise," she tells me. And then: "No one must ever know about this."

"I understand."

"I'm still in London. At a conference. I am not here."

"I understand, Davinia. You can trust me."

"Yes..." she looks puzzled by this, surprised even. "I know I can. "

She pushes her way in, flicks on the light. "Come in."

"No, I need to sleep. I may get an hour, before..."

"You can't go to work today... You can't drive another mile, you must sleep first, properly. Sleep here."

"I'm all right, really."

"You're grey with fatigue. Just sleep, and just... be with me, for a while. Breathe the same air as me. Please." She gives me a look. She's desperate not to be left alone, and this is as close as she'll ever get to telling me.

Breathe the same air as Davinia? What does that mean? It

sounds so much like belonging, but I don't belong with her. She does not want to be alone, for now, but she'll get over it, and then she won't need me any more. I see a spark, a shiver, as if the blood may be returning to her face, guided there by a memory from a time before whatever it was that frightened the life out of her. The corner of her mouth gives a little twitch, as if she may even be trying to smile.

"I'm sorry. I'm really not myself," she tells me.

"I know, but you're strong and you'll find yourself again."

"You think so?"

"Of course you will."

"But I don't know if I ever was anyone before. So what is there to find?"

"Any of us can say the same thing. We go on. That's all there is to it."

I'm still in the hallway. We're not thinking: others might be listening, or we may be disturbing them from their sleep. She's holding open the door, a softness in her eyes and she beckons me in once more. "Please, Richard. Let me make you coffee. Then rest a while. Telephone old Crabby and tell her you'll be in later or something."

So I enter, because I do not know this side of her, and though it should trouble me that she has been grievously wounded, I'm too tired to get at that now, and all there is is this semi-lucid fascination for a side of her I have not seen. This is Davinia, underneath the mask. And she can say my name so sweetly when she wants to.

The flat is furnished now. It's still clinically clean and modern, still unnerving with its unnatural sparkle, and it seems so unlived in, I cannot imagine she spends much time here. The kitchen is white and chrome and black granite. Surely it's never used for something so mundane as cooking? She tosses her coat over a barstool, and makes coffee, takes hers into the bathroom where she runs a bath. She tells me she needs to soak for a while. So I find a luxurious white leather armchair by the French windows, sink down in it and sip my coffee. It's strong and black, and astonishingly good.

There is still no hint of daylight. I am looking out at my own reflection in a black mirror, but beyond it somewhere lies the sea and the western sky. Normally, this hour would paint a dismal picture of any room, but Davinia's flat returns the insult of

approaching reality, and holds on to its mystique of glamour. Whatever has happened, I'm thinking, Davinia will be all right. She's not like me – not for her the flimsy hideaway in the woods and the brewing of herbs. She will find her way through, and she will not be afraid to ask for help when she thinks she needs it. Pills? No problem – if she believes there was nothing there in the first place for pharmaceuticals to erase.

I imagine her curled up here of a weekend, softly sweatered, looking down upon the Marine Gardens, at the passing traffic, at the evening lights and at the setting sun. There is no television, no magazines lying around that might give me clues to the human side of her, which she hides so well. Who is she, then? I do not like to think of her being alone, and lonely, but neither do I like to think of her being so dead inside that she is incapable of loneliness. Which is it to be then, Richard?

Neither the coffee nor the approaching dawn have any effect on the deepening eclipse of my fatigue, and I am gone in minutes, lost to the blackness of a blessed slumber. Something rouses me a little before nine. Guilt perhaps? A premonition of Mrs Crabtree consulting her watch and tutting.

The western sky is now grey and possesses a watercolour softness tinged with blue. I use Davinia's telephone to call the school, taking care to dial 141 first in order to withhold her number – then I explain to Crabby I'm having bowel trouble, but will try to be in later that day.

She gives a deliberate sigh, as if she is displeased with me – which she is – for ringing so late, and for daring to be sick in the first place. I really do not like this woman. I'll introduce you later. I break the call then close my eyes, and the beating of my heart rocks me back to sleep. The apartment seems no longer clinical to me. It is more a blank canvas, uncluttered, not distracting. Warm. I think it's growing on me.

The light has hardened when I come around again – approaching noon this time. I'm sleeping with my eyes half open, through lowered lids. I've been like this for a while, and from the corner of my eye I see Davinia sitting on a sofa, across from me.

She wears a dark blue nightdress, satin and lace, beneath a loose dressing gown, white satin, with bold lilac flowers. The strap of her nightgown has slid down. I see her shoulder and the curve of a breast that ends where the silk is hung upon the nipple, revealing a

half moon of soft pink areola, like a pale sun sinking into a darkening sea.

The vision might have been an erotic one except also I see bruises in the soft flesh of her neck, like fingerprints from a clawed hand. Her legs are curled beneath her – red toenails, slender ankles. Her hair is brushed, and gleaming. She is watching me. I open my eyes fully, so she knows I am awake. She covers her shoulder and I smile.

"You're looking brighter," I tell her.

She makes no reply, but goes on looking at me, as if she has not recognised me until now, and then she says: "You're very kind but I look like... well..." she cannot say. She sighs. "You must be wondering about what happened, but I don't want to talk about it. Ever."

"Okay."

"It's... for me to deal with, in my own way."

"Yes."

"It's not that I'm ungrateful to you... I mean... anyone would have a right to an explanation,..."

"You don't owe me an explanation, Davinia. You don't owe me anything."

"I *am* grateful though... to you... for coming. It wasn't that I expected you would... I mean not after the snooty way I treat you sometimes... only that I hoped you might... because you've led me to believe that you... well... think kindly of me. Anyway, thank you Richard."

"You're welcome Davinia." And then: "I'm going to go home, now. Do you want me to call around later?"

She shakes her head. "I'll be all right, I think."

"Mail me if you need anything. I'll check my in-box regularly."

"It would be easier if you had a 'phone."

"I gave them up a long time ago."

"No home 'phone, no mobile – it's not natural."

"Some might say that. But you know me, I'm keeping the world at bay, and as yet there is no law to say that I must have one."

"I know, but I'm wondering..."

"What?"

"If you're just hiding from life because it bit you once, or if you're afraid of it calling you up and asking you to join in with it again."

"I'm just making my way as best I can."

"I don't think you are. You can do more. Do you think I don't see through you? You sneer at ambition, at success, at the desire to take control. You think you've seen the light. Call yourself a Romantic – whatever that means. You think it's all just a hollow shell. But it's not. This is where it's happening Richard – not some mysterious place inside your head. This is it, here, and now. I'm not saying I've made a success of things, but I still believe it's possible to have power over other people's lives, and be happy. You don't believe it because you've had a kick in the balls, and that's all there is to it.

"People need a guide, Richard. Not everyone wants to lead. They'd sooner follow and that's fine, but they need *someone* to follow, and that someone is me. It could also be you, if it's what you wanted. You despise self seeking, shallow leadership? Then don't be that kind of leader. Be a noble one. Be a fatherly kind of leader. You could do it. I know you could. And you'd be good at it."

I give a careless shrug, but it's a mask. Her words have touched a nerve. I am incapable of fatherhood. Obviously. I take up my jacket, then move towards the door, but she's on her feet and trotting over to me, as if she's afraid she's hurt my feelings. Then she takes my hand and presses my fingers to her lips.

I'm astonished.

Davinia has kissed me.

"I'll see you on Sunday?"

"On Sunday? Oh... at church? Of course."

She's wrong. I do not despise leadership. I fear it. I am not content to follow, but neither have I the courage to lead, so I've withdrawn to the cynical margins of life. I am a ghost, moving through the shadow-lands, afraid of making my presence felt.

I drive back to Marsden in a daze. I'm impossibly tired, unshaven and a bit smelly. I cannot go into school like this. I pull up outside the house on Mill Lane and I stare out at it, wondering who lives in a house like that. Is it me? Grey old Mr Hunter, or is it a young couple starting out, like the randy kids next door? Davinia was right about one thing: I do not belong there. There is something false in my presence. I did not come back to Marsden for this. I did not come back to be in Marsden at all. I came back to be,... in Durleston wood.

Chapter 26

It's February now. Winter is at its coldest, though we have had nothing worse than a few mornings of frost. It's the half term holiday, and I am snug in the bivouac by dawn, a layer of mist, only inches thick, wreathed about the wood, a uniform five feet from the ground, a deathly stillness pervading all, penetrated only by the occasional tumble of a leaf.

I have a fire going, and a kettle roaring on the stove.

Things are as they have always been.

Davinia has returned to school, fresh with buzzwords supposedly gleaned from her conference. Impenetrable acronyms appear on the whiteboards, and the displays in the hall. She presides icily over staff meetings, and attracts dark looks from others when her back is turned. Only I can see that she is paler, that her voice is not so sharp, that her eyes are half turned inwards to the contemplation of something she will not talk about.

And on Sundays she turns out expensively, and immaculately attired to attend church – as do I. There, I sit an hour beside her. I am aware of course that her appearance is a shell, that the wounded Davinia is crouching somewhere underneath, that I shall never reach her, that in any case it is most likely the ice-maiden I delude myself I am in love with, and do not want the fantasy shattering by having her break down in great gulping sobs. If only she could do that, I might be released from my attachment, which we all know is stupid and pointless.

What puzzles me is that she persists in the pretence: Miss Barkwell and her minion, Mr Hunter, representing Marsden C. of E. Primary School. I have heard it mentioned recently, that we represent it rather well. More than this though, our example has tempted mothers and their reluctant offspring from the shadowy sidelines of secular damnation, to put in an appearance on the back pews. The children have begun to swell the numbers of what had been a dwindling Sunday School, much to the chagrin of the ancient old dear who teaches in it, and had been hoping to give it up.

Or it may just be they are curious. It's well known now Davinia and I have had lunch, and the village seeks to sense for itself perhaps, the sexual tension between us. I trust they are as

disappointed as I have been. Still, all that is about to change, and now I'm really going to give them something to talk about.

The kettle is bubbling. Just in time. Lillian is not so deftly footed this morning. I hear her coming from a hundred yards away. She looks anxious, casting little backwards glances, as if she fears the hunter's sights are upon her. I'm prepared with two bowls in which there now steams a sweet, milky tea, one for her and one for me. She will be in need of it.

She drops, breathless, by the fire, shivering. Her hair is wet and hanging in rat-tails. Her clothes are wet too – except she's not wearing much – only a pink flannelette night gown, which is soaked through and clinging to her thighs. I wonder if she wears anything more alluring when her master-owner-lover comes to call. But all of that is over now, so the question is an academic one.

"You're up early," I tell her.

She embraces herself against the cold and nods, coughs a little, and I worry she may be sick again. "I was disturbed at the house. I... I... thought it was him."

"Ah. But it wasn't?"

"No. It was strangers. Two men. They had a van. I thought they'd come for me – but from the way they clumped about I'm sure they thought the house was empty. They were... carpenters? changing the locks! I don't know. He's still not paid the rent! I knew it would come to this! We've been kicked out."

"Well, *he's* been kicked out. You don't exist, remember?"

She's frightened, but she's brought this on herself. Indeed this is exactly what she's been asking for, and I take a moment to study her. Up until now, I've had the sense of her being in complete control of her situation, excepting the means to bring about her freedom of course. But her bondage has made her resourceful and devious, the difference between the truth and the fiction of her existence being a very grey area. Only now do I see her genuinely unsure, genuinely afraid. It is her vulnerability I am seeking to confirm. It's there in her hunted look and I am sorry I ever doubted it, but for all of that there remains a side of her that is calculating. Anyone in her situation would be the same, and I will do well to always be mindful of it.

"You escaped then?" I enquire.

"Out of the back window. No one saw me, but I had to wade through the river. I'm soaked,.. and freezing."

"You've had a fright. I understand. I was expecting you, actually. Warm yourself. Here, I've made you some tea."

As I offer her the bowl, I can tell from the look in her eyes the last thing on her mind is tea. They are wide and pleading. "I don't know what to do! This... this changes everything."

"Well, you can always turn yourself over to the authorities. If you've committed no crime, the worst you can expect is to be deported. I can walk with you to the police station, if you like."

"You know I can't do that."

"Really? I don't see the attraction of my country any more. It's not exactly the place it used to be, you know."

She looks at me darkly. "You've not seen the worst of the world," she says, "or you would know how fortunate you are." And then, quizzically: "You're different this morning."

"New jacket?"

"No... something else... are you all right?"

She's soaking, shivering in the cold of a winter's morning, and she's asking me if I'm all right?

"I think so."

She doesn't believe me. "Are you taking pills?"

I laugh. "No."

"Drinking then?"

"No."

She's read something and is puzzled by it. She's right to be wary. I *have* changed. "Lillian, can I ask you something? If I knew where he was, and I could put you in touch with him, would you want me to?"

"What?" She shakes her head. "No, I will not go near him if I have any choice. What are you saying? Do you know where he is?"

"Then there's nothing of an emotional nature between the two of you? You merely provide a sort of... service?"

I'm being cruel – but not unnecessarily so. Of course there is something between them, indeed I'm led to believe such relationships can be emotionally overpowering, but I need to understand the depth and the breadth of it – not from anything she says, for I'm sure she is a competent liar, but more from the look in her eye when she says it.

"I am his possession. He owns me. There's nothing between us... Adam... what is this? I thought you understood."

This isn't really helping, and I'm aware only of adding to her

distress. "I'm sorry, Lillian. I don't know where he is. I didn't mean to give the impression that I did. But you *do* have a choice now."

"What are you saying?"

"Just give the joiners an hour, then climb back into the house the way you came. I don't suppose they will have noticed an unfastened window."

This doesn't sound like much of a choice to her. "How can I go back?"

"Ordinarily, it would be unwise, I suppose. But in this instance, I suspect the new tenant of Durleston Cottage won't bother much about your being there."

She stares at me, her mouth agape and then she says: "You?"

"I pick the keys up this afternoon."

She lowers her eyes, swallowing something back, drawing over herself a mask because she cannot let me see the look on her face. I've already seen it though, and it's neither gratitude nor relief, more a sort of triumph, which is perhaps dangerous, but I'm prepared to live with it.

"Then I belong to you now." she says, almost proudly.

"Not exactly. Not yet."

It takes her a moment to think this through. She frowns. "You are unhappy about this, Adam."

"There's an inevitability about it, Lillian, so it really makes no difference if I am happy about it or not."

"You are very strange, you know?"

"Yes... you too. But it would be a mistake for you to think I have no purpose in what I'm doing. A mistake also to believe I don't suspect you have a purpose very much of your own, a purpose no doubt you mean to keep from me."

She nods. "I will not make that mistake, Adam."

She looks at me awkwardly now, lost for words, as if expecting something more. She runs her finger speculatively under her collar.

"Shall I cut that for you?" I ask her.

She nods eagerly.

"I'm not sure how these things are supposed to go. You're expecting some sort of ritual perhaps?"

She shrugs. "If you like."

"Okay." I take a breath, then address her more curtly than I am used to speaking with anyone. "Stand up please."

She obeys at once, and I am astonished because as a teacher I'm

used to the feeling that no one is listening to me, let alone doing what I say. I have been given a glimpse into her world, and I wonder to what extent I can command her, yet still expect such dumb obedience. Would she really do anything? *Anything*?

I smell the earth and the long dead leaves, and the woodsmoke, and I see this wet and frightened creature standing submissively before me, her fate in my hands. And though she is shivering in the cold of this February morning, I say to her: "Take off your clothes."

She lifts the sodden hem of her nightgown, peels it over her head to reveal a pitifully thin, golden brown body, with small, pointed breasts. Then there are the black anklets, the black wrist bands, and a pair of thin, cheap panties.

"All of your clothes," I tell her.

Without a murmur she slips them down.

"Now toss them on the fire. The nightgown as well."

She obeys and her wet things sizzle as they give off steam, and the fire consumes them. Her crotch is shaved smooth, I presume to please him, and there is the chain hanging from her studded collar, dropping vertically, between her breasts, dangling over the round of her belly, ending in the steel ring. There is also a large silver clitoral adornment glittering from her intimate folds.

"Is that piercing his?"

She nods.

"Then remove it, and toss it away."

Gently, she eases the ring free and throws it into the woods.

"Now hold still."

I take the knife from my pocket, the curved pruning knife that I have honed to a razor's edge in preparation for this moment, and I approach her. She does not move and keeps her eyes turned away from mine. She smells of the river, and of the earth, and she is hot when my finger slides beneath her collar to open up a gap. She closes her eyes, and takes a breath. The collar and the cuffs are riveted together, and I can only wonder at the ritual this must have involved, this symbolic enslavement, but they part easily enough to the knife. The chain falls with a heavy thud, then I take her wrists.

The cuffs part and fall. Then I move to kneel, so I can cut the ankle straps, but she tells me I cannot kneel before her, so I make her sit in the leaves and the mud, then take each foot, and raise it so I can get at the straps without compromising the rules that she has become familiar with. Finally her ankles are free, and she is

properly naked – her skin blended now with the earth, and I tell her to get up, and walk with me.

She moves noiselessly so that from time to time I must turn and check that she's still there. Eventually, we come to the river. The Rye is normally little more than a foot deep, easily fordable in Wellingtons, but now and then it plunges into a deep pool – deep enough to swim, and these places were once well known to the children of Marsden. But nowadays the children no longer swim the rivers, and these places, like the lore of the woods, are forgotten. We stand by the riverbank, where a sill of greasy rock slices diagonally into the river.

"In you go," I tell her. "It will be cold, I'm afraid."

This is cruel, I know, but neither of us have any say in matters now. We are both commanded by something neither of us understands, something set in motion that first day when I spied her spying upon me.

Gingerly, she feels her way along the greasy sill of rock, then launches herself over and sinks with a cry at the brutal shock of the water. She surfaces, shivering, and gasping, but also laughing, and while she acclimatises and begins to swim a little. I leave my own clothes on the bank and jump in after her.

The shock of it renders me breathless in its crushing grip. It's too much I'm thinking – I was younger when I last did this, and it's hardly the season for swimming in the Rye. But by degrees I am able to draw air, and though I know I am quite mad, I begin, clumsily, to swim, to soak myself in the peaty brown waters, to take it through my pores and become even more immersed in the energies of the wood, and this secret curve of the Rye. She is looking at me, wondering, her teeth chattering, her breaths short and sharp and shivery, but she seems happy, she seems alive. There is not the same dull-eyed subservience about her and she can meet my gaze now without flinching.

"You are crazy," she tells me. "Crazy! Aiii! It's C...COLD!"

We rise together, dripping from the river. She understands this was more than simply washing the scent of him from her, or I would not have felt the need to enter the river myself. And as we stand there, the air that had before seemed repulsive in its coldness, now feels electric and warm on our skins. She stands upon the sill of rock, a dainty balancing act, girlish and light. Then I bid her stand stock still and look me in the eye and when she looks I know

she does not see her master in me, that we are both of us reborn, both of us now the children of Durleston Wood. I have the chain she once wore around her neck, and as a parting gesture, I toss it into the river. The Rye accepts the offering, and the challenge.

"We'll catch our death," she says.

But I suspect we both caught that particular thing long ago.

Chapter 27

I come down to the house at nightfall with only a sleeping bag and a change of clothes in a rucksack. I do not bring the car, preferring to wait until daylight before I negotiate the track for the first time. I have a month yet to run on my lease of the house on Marsh Lane, so there is time to ease myself cautiously into Durleston Cottage and into Lillian's presence.

I had found the letting agent in a sour smelling office in Middleton, a cramped little room over a solicitor's. Durleston had been a thorn in his side for years. It was impossible to re-let, being too remote, too rough, and too lonely for the modern tastes. Loneliness and remoteness have their attractions, but only if they also come with central heating, satellite reception and a fibre optic broadband connection. It needed modernisation, but now was not the time to be investing in property, especially when that investment probably meant demolition and rebuilding. And the tenant was difficult, elusive, suspiciously hard-nosed and intimidating. Then this fool walks in with a dreamy-eyed look about him, and money to burn, even offering to cover the arrears, if he can move in right away.

The darkness of Durleston at night is hard to describe. Blackness will have to suffice. It's dangerous: an uneven path, lumpy with rocks and tree-roots, and branches, clawing, unseen until the last moment. I am moving more in my imagination than through a landscape of tangible reality. There is also an unfamiliar industrial scent – woodsmoke, paper, plastic,... chemicals. She has been burning things.

Finally I see the amber glow and imagine it to be the remains of a bonfire, but no: she's lit a lamp, and placed it on the landing. It guides me to the front door, where I put my key into the lock and let myself in.

"Lillian? It's me."

"In here, Adam."

Her eyes are the brightest thing in the sitting room. The cherry glow from the wood-burner is dull compared with the halogen brightness of those eyes. She's sitting on a cushion, curled up in the middle of the floor, and appears to be wearing an ivory satin sheet that she's wrapped about herself like a Sari. I hand her a piece of

chain with keys attached

"This is the only chain I'll ever give you."

She takes the chain with its keys, and slips them over her head. "Thank you," she says.

"Listen, we must be clear about this. You're free now. If he comes for you I will try to protect you. If you need money, I have a little. Don't be afraid to ask me for it. But I don't expect anything from you in return. That's not what I have come here for. You sleep wherever you did before, and I'll sleep in any room that's going spare."

"All right."

"Nor must you fear that I'll ever betray you to the authorities. But if they find you, you must understand that I won't be able to protect you from them. I'm nothing in this country. I have no... influence."

"I'm not afraid of them, or of him."

"A woman living alone... she's going to be talked about. We know you've been seen. But as the wife, or girlfriend, or chattel of a man you're more easily explained in people's minds. So that's the story I'll put about if anyone asks me, all right? Though you must trust me when I say I do not feel that way about you."

"Which way will you not feel about me? Wife, girlfriend or chattel?"

"They're just labels. Let others pick them. Meanwhile, let us just be ourselves."

"Which is what?"

"Hmm?"

"What is ourselves, please?"

"Let's discover that as we go along, shall we?"

A man is more easily controlled by a woman when he is bound in sex to her, and I'm wondering if this is what she's thinking about. But I have not come to make love to her. I have come to live here.

"All right, Adam. But I am your slave now. It pleases me to think this way. Do you understand? So, you must not be afraid to command me, like... like you did this afternoon."

"Then slip off that sheet you're wearing and open your legs for me."

She blinks, perhaps not expecting this, but searches for the end of the sheet in order to unwrap it. She's reluctant, I think, but will not let me see it. What is this? It would please me to be your slave

Adam, but do not ever command me to be so?

"All right. You can stop."

"Adam?"

"Don't you see? It's not what I want. If I took advantage of you I'd be no better than the bastards who led you into this trap in the first place."

"But it is not advantage you would be taking. It would be pleasure. Yours and mine."

"Then why did you hesitate just now?"

"I did? Forgive me, Adam... I... you took me a little by surprise, that's all. But if not that, then what do you want from me? This is such a risk for you. Why are you here?"

"Redemption for past deeds."

"This is new? I have not heard this one before."

She reaches out suddenly. For a moment I think she's being tender, but there's something urgent about the way her fingers are digging into my arm. "I saw a light," she says.

"What?"

"There's a car, coming down the track. I'm sure of it."

"I didn't see anything."

She stands up and moves to the window but there is only a reflection of herself in it. Then see a flash reflected up against the trees – quite faint, but she's right: there is a car approaching the house.

"He's coming," she says.

"It might not be him."

"Who else would it be, at this hour? No one else drives down here... ever."

"The letting agency must have written to him. He's come to get his belongings perhaps."

"There's nothing here. He leaves nothing, no trace of himself – only me."

"Then he's come for you."

"But I'm no longer his."

"We've yet to explain that to him."

"He does not exist for me any more. I'm sorry Adam. I did not expect this so soon. I thought we might have had at least tonight."

"It's done. Is there a weapon I can use? A stick perhaps?"

"I have a kitchen knife."

"Well that's perhaps a bit over the top – look, never mind.

Perhaps he'll be reasonable." But knowing him as I do, I doubt this very much. "I'll talk to him..."

"Yes." She squeezes my arm. "But take no risks with him. He might assume I've run away. Let him."

"And if he knows you've not, that you're still here?"

"Then he will be angry. But he will not take me Adam."

It's as well I do not step outside brandishing anything even remotely resembling a weapon. My visitor wears a farmer's overall – and Wellingtons. I cannot make out his car, but it's something small, an old Suzuki jeep I think. It's William. News travels fast and he's come to shake my hand, bid me welcome, and find out what the hell a soft palmed man like Mr Richard Hunter thinks he's doing renting a rough old place like this.

I invite him in, my immense relief being translated as over familiarity perhaps, but he excuses himself on account of the dung on his overalls. "Just dropped by to say welcome," he says. He was checking ditches in his top meadow, he explains, and was only a few minutes away, so he'd thought to pop down and say hello. This is a lie of course. He's just being nosey.

"You'll find it a bit quiet down here, but I'm only a mile up the road if you need anything."

"That's kind of you, I appreciate your coming."

"Is there plenty of wood in the shed?"

"I've not checked yet – this is my first night, you see? Are you sure you won't come in?"

"No... it's all right, thanks. I can drop some wood off you want... get you going like."

"I'd appreciate that... thank you."

"It's not a bad little place this. All its ever needed was a bit of tidying up."

We've talked of this before. It's the middle of the night. What does he want? "Yes,... I plan to do that."

"Quare bugger that other fella. Don't be surprised if you turn up a stash of drugs or guns or summat."

William is laughing. I warm to his good nature, in spite of his nosiness. "I'd better be careful then, " I tell him.

"On yer own down here are you?"

Ah, now we're getting to it. "Em... well... least said eh?" I give him a wink. He touches his nose and gives me a conspiratorial nod. Man to man, sort of thing – which means he'll tell his wife before

supper time and then it will be all round the village tomorrow: Mr Hunter is living with a woman in Durleston Cottage – and teaching at a *Church* school and all! There will be tours of the woods, the whole of Marsden coming to gawp and to wonder at the audacity of it.

They will think me an old fool, and when they realise Lillian's origins they will assume she is an internet bride or something. It's a risk of course, but this is England, and no one will think to ask her for her papers – at least not until the council sends their annual registration forms. I shall lie of course. I may get away with it for a year or two, but we'll be found out eventually. It shocks me that I really do not care about any of this. I have already realised that with Lillian there are no tomorrows.

"Aren't you going to struggle," he asks. "I mean without a computer? I thought everything was done on computers these days – even teaching, like?"

"Well... I'm told there's enough electricity to run a computer. I dare say I shall manage."

"Best of luck then..."

When I go back in, she's no longer in the living room. I call her name, and she answers from upstairs, so I climb the steps and find her sitting cross legged in the hammock, a kitchen knife in her hands. The sheet is underneath her, she is naked, and lovely, but I find it disturbing. What if it *had* been him. Did she mean to calmly slit her wrists?

It reminds me I haven't really a clue what I'm getting into here. And besides the tragedy of it, how on earth was I supposed to explain it to the authorities?

The hammock sways gently under her weight and she seems to be floating in air as she thumbs the blade. A bright half moon has slid from beneath blankets of midnight blue and casts a cool, silvery light through curtainless windows. There is no look of alarm in her eyes,.. nor relief.

"Not him, then?" she asks. She drops the knife, so it falls to the floor with a clatter. There is cold blood in her.

"It was William, come to have a nosey. I've told him I'm not alone here."

"You have committed yourself then... to me."

"It seems so."

"I am not afraid, Adam."

"We should keep a low profile all the same. We'll soon be forgotten."

"It does not matter. I am happy. Now we shall have at least tonight."

"Lillian, I do not want to sleep with you."

"Yes you do. There's nowhere else; no spare room. Anyway, it's all right; we have always been lovers Adam."

"You've said that before. I didn't understand it then, and I don't now."

"You see something in me, something from a time before ever we were born."

"I already have a woman, Lillian."

"Your girlfriend again? Hmm. What will she say about all of this, I wonder. But she is not your lover, Adam. And anyway you do not *have* her."

She lies back in the hammock, props her head upon her hand and smiles at me. "There's a duvet in the box. I did not quite burn everything. Forgive me. Bring it. Just lie with me. This is your bed, I am your servant and merely warm it for you."

"Servant? You seem more the master here, Lillian."

"Then command me. See? You cannot. I must teach you first, how to command me."

"Have you not had enough of.... sex... in this house?"

"Yes. And the house weeps for me. But now it brings me a man who would be my lover. Adam, there is no future here. We both know that. There may not even be a tomorrow. All we have is now. You do not need to sit in your tent in the woods any more. Have you not had enough of disappointment? Women who reject you, misunderstand you – women like your girlfriend who do not even know your name? I will not be so disappointing to you. If only you would command me."

I take the duvet from the box and toss it over her. She laughs and wriggles her head free. The hammock rocks gently and in the darkness it lends a giddy feel, as if it is the room itself that moves, while she stays still.

"Sometimes, Lillian, you talk too much."

"I do?"

"Will that thing support us both?"

She nods and I undress, while she watches, and then, ever so gingerly, I ease myself beside her. I am unprepared for the shock of

her touch. She is head to toe a balm of warmth and softness and smoothness. "When you said, lie together, I don't suppose there's any chance you actually meant just lying together?"

"Don't be silly, Adam."

Chapter 28

She has burned every stitch of her clothes. I find their remains in the bonfire she has made in the back garden. There are only charred fragments now. I recognise bits of the dress she wore when she first presented herself to me that day by the beech tree. There are also blackened buckles, bits of leather, chain, plastic – the soles of shoes, all cold now, wet with overnight rain, and the whole of it overhung with a shivery mist. I am impressed by the strength of her resolve, but it presents us now with a very particular problem.

She stands behind me as I contemplate the meaning in the pattern of these things, wrapped only in the duvet. It's not escaped my imagination that I could dress her like my own submissive mannequin, pick her entire wardrobe: the kind of underwear I would like to see her in, design the look that I would like to make love to. To be sure, there is something erotic in such thoughts, but I remind myself I have come to set her free, and in so doing, release also a part of myself.

"I can loan you some trousers and a shirt," I tell her. "Then we'll take a walk into town this afternoon and you can buy some fresh clothes."

"I have no money, Adam."

"I'll give you the money. I told you. You understand the money means nothing to me. You are under no obligation to return it, under no obligation to me at all – I could burn every penny I own just as easily as you burned this stuff here."

"Then I thank you. I will not... take advantage of your generosity."

"Don't thank me. You owe me nothing. It's a mystery why we're together. But we are. And that's all there is to it."

She looks downcast. "You are not so pleased with me this morning as you were last night?"

Last night, indeed! Lillian, so sweet, so tender... then me, a man of my years, thinking he knew pretty much all there was to making love, and discovering actually he knew very little. And now, instead of the unguarded language of lovers, here I am talking of practical matters, in a practical sort of voice.

But she has shown me such warmth and I'm afraid to lose it... afraid there will never be another night like last night, when

touched me so very deeply. But there is also a darkness about it, about her, a danger in her touch.

Was it not ever so?

I hold out my arm for her, and she crouches close. It feels at first as if she's shivering, but I realise she's weeping. Then I am weeping too. I don't know what this means.

"I won't let any harm come to you. Do you understand?"

"Yes... yes..."

We both know my words are well meant, but otherwise empty.

In the afternoon I find myself on Middleton market with a quiet woman in baggy clothes, and training shoes that are too big for her. But for all of that we draw very little attention to ourselves. Middleton has grown poor and there are others who appear even more dishevelled than we do.

You know I have a dislike of towns, and find myself both paranoid and puzzled over the level of camera surveillance. They are for our own good, we're told, our protection, yet our towns are more dangerous now than ever they were. The cameras sweep uselessly over walls obliterated by graffiti, and shine their blindness into street corners filthy with litter. And for all of their efficiency they are unable to curb the tide of petty crimes, crimes perhaps considered unimportant nowadays, that is Lillian who is considered the more dangerous enemy: her mystery, her *otherness* must be denied at all costs.

I take no interest in what she chooses, merely give her the money and watch from a distance while she explores the stalls. She was once a smart wheel turning in the machinery of our capital, now reduced to the status of a fugitive. My money is clean. It buys her clean clothes. His was filthy. She disappears briefly into the ladies toilets and re-emerges in blue jeans, black top, hiking boots, and a waterproof jacket. The jacket is like the one she wore before, thornproof, cowled, monk-like. She has spare clothing in a rucksack, also a cheap pair of unbranded trainers, and everything that is extraordinary about her appears to have gone. On seeing me, she looks up and does something inexplicably touching: she smiles, without guile. There is in it a genuine gratitude, I think. I fool myself meanwhile that I have enabled her to feel clean again and allow myself to wallow in the nobility of it. But no amount of cheap clothing will ever right the wrong that she has suffered.

We have walked into town along the track that leads to

Durleston Cottage. This is an unmade lane, along which the flimsy, modern suburbs of Middleton encroach year on year. It skirts the rim of the valley, and the detritus from these housing developments finds ever more insidious ways of contaminating the wood, and the waters of the Rye: plastic carrier bags, beer cans, paint pots, dog turds. And on our return this way, a hundred yards beyond the last house, we come upon the still smouldering remains of a Vauxhall Astra. We are two miles away from the house, so we do not fear for the defilement our sanctuary, but there is something in the obviously violent death of this vehicle that shakes us.

The stench of it is repulsive, and I can see the flames reflected in her eyes as she contemplates it quietly. It's nothing – evidence of joy-riders, feral children, a trivial thing, but it is also a monstrous ugliness – spiritless, soulless, and it makes me question the point of my tenacity in clinging to life in such a world as this. It will be weeks even before the wreck is cleared away, and the mess of it, the crystal shards of glass, the pools of once molten plastic, and the bits of fascia, and the whole dark stain of what we have witnessed will be years in fading.

The back window is busted out and on the parcel shelf there is a teddy bear, its synthetic fur fried to an ugly black frazzle. It strikes me that this object was once the attention of a child's love, but love was insufficient to spare it this indignity. It is perhaps an ill omen.

When you live inside your mind as much as I do, you can convince yourself that anything is true, that love and a belief in magic and in the spirit of places such as this are still a worthwhile currency, but now and then the mundane world fires a shot across your bows as if to remind you of your fragility and of the futility of your dreams in the face of an overwhelming tide of cynicism and filth. Lillian gives a shudder and we walk on. She takes my arm. We say nothing. But we each know what the other is thinking.

"I'll bring the car down tomorrow," I tell her. "And some other things – my computer, some clothing – that's all I have."

"You will not be bringing your three piece suite and double divan bed, then?"

"Ha... no. I like things as they are... I like the way you live here."

"There is no internet."

"I can use a mobile."

"A 'phone?"

"No. A thing that plugs into the computer."

"Ah... a dongle? Do I surprise you with my knowledge? I told you. I did not always live this way."

"You surprise me every day, Lillian. I'll also need... tools. For the garden."

"There are some about the house, I think."

"And I'll have to get someone to come down with a skip to clear all the scrap and the rubbish. Will that bother you?"

"No. I am nothing. I will hide in your shadow. You are right, they will not notice me now. I am your chattel. So, you are settling in then?"

"Yes. And I'll make you a promise. By the summer, there will be a pretty garden at Durleston Cottage, and a smooth green lawn that will run down to the Rye, and there will be a table and chairs, and you and I will sit out – you in a straw hat and a pretty frock, and we shall sip lemonade as the sun goes down."

"You make it sound so lovely, Adam. But remember, we should not think so far ahead. All we shall ever have is today."

But I do not want it to be like that. I have a vision now that makes me happy, and I want to hold onto it. "You said you wanted me to do it. You showed me the garden. You asked me if I would do it."

"Yes, because I thought it would lure you to me. I did not expect that you would do it, but I will like it. And it is so long since I wore a pretty frock."

"It's settled then."

But she's right: all there will ever be for us is today; this moment; now. I do not fool myself that this can end any other way but badly, and I am afraid of that – afraid also of her lack of fear. She knows I'm powerless, yet she trusts, and if it all goes wrong, she will merely step out of this life altogether.

"Is it your religion," I ask her.

She's puzzled. "Is what my religion? But Adam, I am like you I have no religion."

"I just can't understand how could face it so calmly – taking your life – unless you're assured of being reborn. Is that what you're thinking?"

She smiles and shakes her head. "I trust this is not all there is, Adam. That there might be something to follow. But equally, it would not be wise to take it for granted. Now this afternoon, I shall begin teaching you how to control me."

"I told you, I don't want to."
"But you must," she says, "or I will overwhelm you."

Chapter 29

My shirts are no longer pressed, because there is not the means to do them at the cottage – certainly not enough electricity to power an iron. Washing clothes is possible, but tedious, and I prefer to run them into town, then sit an hour in quiet contemplation at the laundrette. I present therefore, a slightly crumpled appearance, when I return to school, after the February Half Term – also a muddy pair of shoes – but this is a small price to pay for the sudden shocking serenity of my life.

Davinia watches.

She senses the change and is curious about it. I am flattered she notices. Serenity is a wonderful thing. It grants you the peace of mind to sense things, to see the things to which you would otherwise be blind. Meanwhile the school overwhelms me with images of a past life.

There is a corridor here, between the hall and the staff-room. It's one of the places untouched by renovation – half panelled, then plastered to the ceiling. It has a ring to it, so that when the children come from their assembly I am sometimes surprised to find myself an adult, and not one of them, making my way to class in the nineteen sixties. Then there is the scent of dust and of the overheated children themselves, kicking up memories with each breath.

It's after five now, and the children have gone home. There is only Davinia, locked deep in conference with a burly builder regarding repairs to window-frames. I should be thinking of going home, but I have spotted a beam of sunlight slanting through a window into the school hall, and I have followed it, to sit in the golden pool it paints upon the boards. I am cross legged, in my shirt sleeves, and in my mind's eye I am looking at a girl, thirty five years ago. I see everything about her, every pore, every downy lash, and I feel my heart racing at the magic of her smile. The sun is in her hair, and motes of dust are spiralling about us like fireflies. I want to ask her if she can forgive me.

But then Davinia is in the doorway. Her meeting is over, the builder has been dismissed with his orders.

"Richard?"

I smile, breathe deeply of the memory, then gaze at her. She has

a look of Lillian, I'm thinking – the old Lillian, I mean: tall, willowy, angel-blonde hair. This confuses me for a moment. I wonder if she's all right. Davinia, I mean. Heavens, how my affections dance around these days.

"Yes?"

"What on earth are you doing?"

"Oh... just sitting here in this pool of light. Did I tell you I used to come here as a child? That this was my old primary school?"

She enters, red high heels clicking on the boards, and she sits daintily upon the end of an exercise bench. "Really? How awful for you!"

Yes.

How does she know this?

I suffered all manner of nightmare and humiliation here: the incomprehensible scoldings of psychopathic teachers, a caning for something someone else had done, the sense of wrongness, the fear of not fitting in, the fear of strangeness, of *being* strange... and the hauntingly eerie heartache of having failed Lillian...

But this is all so long ago.

I've grown up.

I am old.

Yet everything is the same.

"Go home," she tells me.

But I'm not listening. I'm lost inside my head, unravelling a thread of existential angst."Why *am* I here, Davinia?"

I do not expect her to have the answer.

"Don't talk to me like this," she says.

"Oh?"

"I cannot talk this way. You know I can't."

"With me, you mean?"

"With anyone. You are a dreamer, Richard. You are a Romantic, remember? You are Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and everything you say makes me wonder if you're stoned on something. But really, there are no answers to the questions you ask, and it's silly to pretend there are."

"But might there not be something in it? If there was truly no point in asking the question, why would we be in possession of the means of doing so?"

We've not spoken since the morning I dropped her off at the flat – not spoken of the thing that did not happen, though I have

watched her day by day, brushing off the dirt of it. She shines now much in the old way, but she still thinks of it. Of course she does.

"Richard,...?" I catch the question mark in her tone, but she does not finish. "Nothing," she says. "Go home."

And now it's Sunday. Early March. The first daffodils have begun to show, and Davinia follows me from Church. We have shared a pew, but exchanged no more than a nod of professional recognition. She notices I am without my car, and asks if I would like a lift home.

"That's kind of you, but I'm no longer living on Mill Lane. I gave up the lease a while ago. I'm living... somewhere else now."

She smiles. She looks crisply immaculate in a long blue woollen coat. She's wearing perfume... something crisp, lemony, fresh. "I'm pleased to hear it," she tells me. "It never suited you there."

I'm sure she'd think Durleston suited me even less.

"You mean to keep it a secret then?" she prompts.

"Hmm?"

"You seem to be in no hurry to tell me where you've moved to."

"It's not far. Still in the village, sort of. It's just that it's off the beaten track. Down a long muddy lane. It would be a considerable imposition, and I'm fine walking, really."

Though I do miss riding in the Jaguar with her.

"All right," she says. "But I'm curious."

She's about to take her leave of me, when she turns and says in parting: "Richard, I hope you don't mind my saying, but do something about your shirts will you? These days it always looks like you've been sleeping in them. It's really not like you."

"I will... yes."

She's about to go, but then pauses once more, as if she's just summoned the courage to ask me something more personal: "You've not *actually* been sleeping in them, have you?"

"No... no..."

"And you're all right?"

"Perfectly."

She nods, though she's unconvinced, and suspicious. I watch her drive away. Will she be going to the flat, I wonder. I imagine her, curled up in that armchair by the window, the Sunday papers all around her, a cup of coffee in her lap as she gazes out. She seems lost, at times. For whom does she dress? For whom the smile, the tenderness? No, Richard, Davinia is anything but tender; you are

fantasising again. But still, I have the feeling that I've glimpsed something, that I've sensed, if not exactly *seen* her scars, that I understand her a little. And even if she cannot bring herself to be tender in her dealings with the world, I cannot help but feel protective towards her.

It's a fine morning, the first touch of a warm sun. It will be short lived I know, a clear night, and a hard frost in the morning, but I sense the coming of spring in it. I take a breath gladly, then turn my steps for Durleston, and Lillian. I feel stupidly, deliriously happy, because there is no longer a tomorrow, just as there was no yesterday. It's profoundly liberating, but totally unsuitable for living as we must all live today, and I know it will not last.

It cannot.

She's waiting in the woods, hiding like a little girl behind a silver birch. I spot her easily, but feign surprise when she leaps out and jumps upon my back. She's so light, there seems to be nothing to her, and she laughs. I swing her down but keep her clamped to my waist and we walk back to the cottage together. I love the feel of her, love the sureness of her steps and the red hot energy of her.

The cottage is looking very different now, and the sunshine, coming in shafts through the canopy, improves it further, painting it with fingers of light and making the mouldy white render look brighter than it really is. All the scrap and the rubbish has gone – every speck of it and, little by little, the encroaching scrub has been felled, uprooted and burned, the boundaries of the garden re-established. I have the callouses and the back-ache to bear witness, also the ever present smell of Tiger Balm that Lillian rubs so sensuously into my aching muscles of an evening. I am also growing leaner, fitter. I had thought time ran only one way from here, into old age, but I feel I have been given back a decade. And every night I lie with this woman, and she opens for me the doorway to a heaven I had once only dreamed of.

I'm cut off from news of the world, and that's fine by me. I hear the girls in the staff-room talking about things that have gone on, but I pay no heed to them, and my life is just the same for it. I have the internet, and I suppose I could bring up the news on that, but I deliberately do not, and reserve its use for my school-work, for sending my planning, and my reports to Davinia.

Of course, I'm only too aware that out in the world there is a war, because in the middle of it is my son. You might think I'd want

to keep up with that at least, but really one never knows what to believe of the things we're told, and it's really better not to hang on every breathless word of the punditry. But can he really be so lost to me that I do not fear for him? Can the severance be so final, so complete? No, of course not. But he does not think of me, so what am I to do?

Is this the definition of loneliness: the fear of old age, that you might reach a stage in your life when there is no one left to think of you any more? Lillian thinks of me. Perhaps Davinia thinks of me too, a little – I'm sure she does. There's something pragmatic, I think, in the reserving of ourselves for those who think of us – think kindly of us at least.

"Was your girlfriend there this morning?" Lillian asks.

"Yes."

"What did she say to you?"

"That my shirts are crumpled."

She laughs. "Well, they *are*, Adam. Will she punish you for it?"

"Knowing her she might. There's a place in town that irons things. I can drop them off there."

"Ah, but would you not *prefer* her to punish you?"

"No. I remember the last time she did that. She can be very severe."

"Oh... but the bliss of her kindness afterwards! Have you not thought of that?"

Safe inside the hush of the cottage, she takes my coat and my shoes. There is something cooking on the Aga. I overcame my squeamishness and snared a fat rabbit yesterday, and Lillian has stolen some vegetables from William's field. She finds there is a guilty pleasure in it. We do not live like this all the time, and I visit the supermarket like everyone else, but once in a while, it's good to return to the earth this way, though I can see I will have to begin growing vegetables, in case she gets caught. William is already generous, bringing wood for us to split. He is on nodding terms with Lillian now, and there is a growing sense of normality here that unnerves me, because surely nothing can ever really be normal. To step into Durleston is to be swallowed by the myth, to become part of it.

I have made a trunk, like a seaman's chest, and everything I have chosen to retain in life goes inside of it. What will not fit, I have thrown away. I put my trousers and my jacket in it, change

into a pair of jeans, then sit in the lounge, cross legged upon the cushions, like a Sultan, and Lillian brings tea. She kneels before me and lays the tea down like an offering to the gods, but struggles to conceal a smile. It gives her pleasure to serve me like this.

In the early days, her servitude did not fit well with me, even though I knew it was pretended. But she told me simply that if I knew it gave her pleasure to be this way, and yet denied her, would that not be crueller than permitting her to play the game? And she knew I would not command her cruelly, she said, because if I did it would make her unhappy, and I had led her to believe that was the last thing I wanted. Thus the female encounters the male and controls him by appearing to yield.

I think I understand this now. I think I also understand that in denying her the opportunity to serve me, a part of me is saying I am not worthy of the crown, that to deny it when such devotion is offered, is to deliberately belittle myself, to press aside the chalice, and so prevent my own return to god-given equanimity. *And is that not itself a sin, Adam?* I would ask the Reverend, but I suspect he wouldn't know what I was talking about.

While there is daylight, I continue my work in the garden. I clear back the boundary, uncover piece by piece, the old wall and begin to repair it. I discover fallen gateposts of chiselled millstone, and set them upright. I bring a new gate from the timber-merchant in Middleton, paint it, set it swinging nicely and latching with an oily click. I paint the door of the house, and I painstakingly turn over the garden, sod by sod, though concentrating on the stretch down to the Rye, where I scatter seed.

And when the light fades, or when it is too cold to work, and the house itself shivers, I do my school work to the clatter and the diesel stench of the generator. Then I take my pressed shirt from the top of my trunk and lay it ready for the morning, so that Davinia will not be displeased with me, and I retire to my hammock, where Lillian has already warmed the covers and is waiting to warm me also.

Chapter 30

Word finally reaches the village, and trickles slowly into the ears of the governors of Marsden C. of E. Primary School, who consult the vicar, who looks strangely at me for a few Sundays. I know well enough the nature of his thoughts by the feel of anxiety in his palm when I take my leave of him by the church door.

Not knowing how to broach the subject he speaks to Davinia, and asks her to sound me out. Davinia is reluctant, because this is a personal matter, also something of a surprise to her, and she insists the vicar and Grizelda join her in the interrogation.

Thus it is, I am sought out by a smug looking Mrs Crabtree, who seems to take an oily pleasure in summoning me into Davinia's office one evening. She's heard the rumours too and smells blood. Thus it is I find myself sitting down before an icy looking inquisition, and sense my world about to take a turn, the direction of which I shall have to judge now by the seat of my pants.

Davinia opens the meeting. She's uncomfortable, and repeatedly coils her hair in her fingers – a nervous tic she has recently adopted, and which concerns me. Her discomfort is not on account of the rumour itself, I'm thinking, because we see eye to eye, and we both know this is none of anyone's business. Her discomfort then is in having to pretend she thinks I have misbehaved.

"Richard, do you mind if we have a word with you?"

I cannot help but take pleasure in tormenting them. "Would that be a door open word or a door closed word?"

She tightens the grip on her hair and closes her eyes in exasperation. "Close the door, Richard, and sit down please."

I wonder at the presence of Grizelda. I had thought we were friends now, or at least we had ceased to be enemies, since my failure to convince the psychologist her granddaughter was unfit to be let loose among other children. But from her beady-eyed expression, I can see she too has smelt blood, and this overrides all other factors. She will always be a shark, hungry for the disgrace of others. The Reverend Whitman would rather not be there at all. It is as if he has discovered I am a demon in disguise, and have crapped all over his innocent faith in me. He cannot meet my eyes now, and I am sorry for it.

Davinia begins: "There seems to be some... em... uncertainty...

regarding your,..." she sighs as if she cannot believe she's about to say it: "your... personal situation, Richard. I'm sure we can clear it up very quickly."

"Of course. I surely hope so. Is it my change of address? I'm sorry if I was slow to inform the school. I passed the details on some weeks ago, however, to Mrs Crabtree."

"This is not about your change of address."

"Oh?"

"Richard..." *How tightly she's gripping her hair. Are you all right Davinia? Blinkhorn's not bothering you again is he?* "There are rumours circulating that you are... co-habiting with... someone."

"There are?"

Grizelda chips in, red lipstick glistening: "Do you deny it?"

I try to appear nonplussed, which isn't difficult because I am genuinely surprised by the direction the conversation is going. Surely, they don't mean to officially reprimand me for living with a woman – whether I am R.E. coordinator or not. It seems so... Victorian.

"I don't understand. This is a personal matter, and has nothing to do with the school, nor, with the greatest of respect, any of you. But since you bring it up, I do not deny it."

The reverend exhales. His worst fears are realised. "But this puts us in a very difficult position, Mr Hunter." His voice almost pleads with me – for surely, how could I have been so stupid not to realise it?

"How so, Reverend?"

"We must be seen to be morally irreproachable."

Did he really mean it to come out like that? It matters not that we are morally *reproachable*, so long as we are not caught out? I like the reverend very much. He is both a gentleman and a gentle man, but I wonder that his mind-set has not moved on. Does he really mean to construct a stone wall of Victorian morality that was patently corrupt even in its heyday? Should I remind him that only half of the children attending this school can actually name their fathers?

"Am I to understand you feel I have let the school down in some way?"

He grimaces, and clearly does not want to say any more than he absolutely has to.

I continue: "I assure you I would never knowingly do that. Has

there been a complaint?"

Grizelda preens. "We're merely seeking to head off any criticism of your conduct."

She's being too direct. I see it in the Reverend's eyes. Davinia's too. A flicker of alarm. Grizelda does not possess an A-level in diplomatic fog.

My turn I think: "My *conduct*? I'm sorry, but I must admit to being somewhat... perplexed. You'll have to be more explicit, I'm afraid. Is it because she's... foreign?"

A cheap shot, Richard, I know. But to my surprise I discover by their protestations to the contrary I have indeed scored a hit! My God! Only Davinia is urbane enough to remain bemused, while the others draw back in an exaggerated display of horror that surely condemns them all as bigots. The reverend returns the volley. "Most certainly *not*, Mr Hunter... it's merely... the question of marriage,..."

"And what question is that?"

Grizelda feigns exasperation. "Why, the *lack* of it, Mr Hunter."

"But who's saying I'm not married? That can only be an assumption, since I have not talked openly about it."

Confusion! Mr Hunter is married? Is that what he's saying? Grizelda is crestfallen, the Reverend relieved, and puzzled, but more relieved... I mean at the possibility that I *might* be married. Well, I am married still, just about, only not to Lillian. The Reverend perhaps feels he should pursue the matter further for clarification, but no, it's enough. Safer to let it lie.

Only Davinia is smart enough to read this as a statement of spurious fact, that I'm letting the others draw their own assumptions from it. She wonders what I'm playing at. I could tell her I'm only thinking to delay a while longer their asking for my resignation. I'm not expecting them to fall for it at all, but apparently they have done. I discover I'm actually disappointed by their lack of intelligence.

Grizelda is not pleased I'm about to wriggle off the hook so easily, but the Reverend is content to let it go. He's looking at me again, though whether this means we are friends once more, or he's trying to tell if I'm lying, I cannot say. Davinia takes a breath and seeks to control the situation. "Well," she says. "I think we're all agreed that's an end to it?"

Grizelda raises her finger, perhaps meaning to ask for a copy of my wedding certificate, but Davinia cuts her off with a look. "We'll

not detain you any longer, Richard. Thank you for being so patient with us."

"That's perfectly all right, Davinia. I'm sorry for any misunderstanding."

Her eyes are twinkling. It's as if she's trying to stop herself from laughing. The only misunderstanding is the one I've just created. But she defended me. Why?

I'm in the classroom now, packing my laptop away. The others have gone. I had hoped to avoid Davinia, because I will have to be more honest with her, but she blocks my escape.

"What *are* you up to Richard?"

"I was just packing my things..."

"That's not what I meant. You're *not* married to this girl."

"Like I said in there, how can you know that?"

"Because I know *you*. This is ridiculous. Tell me, when was this fairy-tale romance consummated?"

"Consummated? Em... February."

"February?"

"Half term. I... went abroad. We've... been corresponding for a while."

"You're trying to tell me she's what? An internet bride or something? Oh, Richard, stop it. You don't even have a passport."

"I do. Of course I do! What do you take me for?"

"Please! You're making a complete ass of yourself."

"There's no harm. Lots of older men like me strike up an intimate friendship with pretty girls from abroad."

"I didn't mean *that*, and if it's the truth then good luck to you both, but I thought *we* were friends."

Friends? That's new. And interesting: since when were we ever friends, Davinia? "You flatter me."

"All right... not friends then, but... *something*. I thought I could *trust* you. And now you're lying to me. There's no way you're married to this girl! I won't have it. You can fool the others all you like, but you're not fooling me."

"Okay, okay. But you *can* trust me. I would never let you down Davinia. Not *you*."

"You already have!"

"No... the school maybe, the governors and their peculiarly nineteenth century morals... but not you. *Never you*. Look, there's a generation in this God forsaken village who's never known a day's

work. And as we speak, there are kids not much older than the ones we teach in here scoring drugs around the back of the railway station. I know this. You know this. Everyone in Marsden knows this, except apparently for the policeman who seems more interested in whether my brake light is working or not. And there are more kids coming to this school now, unwashed, smelling of wee, and crawling with head-lice than there ever were in nineteen sixty five. And you're telling me the school's *more* concerned about the salacious gossip caused by Mr. Hunter who's living in a house in the woods, with a brown-skinned girl?"

"Have you quite finished?"

"I'm sorry. I know you're not like that. I don't mean to include you... you know..."

"Richard!"

"Sorry... yes, I've finished."

"You should hear yourself when you have a head of steam behind you."

"I didn't mean to lose my temper."

"No... it's impressive. And you didn't lose it. You controlled it. You were forceful, and coherent – not everyone can do both. You should do it more often."

"No... I hate it. Anger's useless. It's a waste of energy, and at my time of life I need all the energy I can get. I've been feeling so relaxed lately. I don't know what brought it on."

"Yes, it's infectious – this new-found serenity of yours. Considering what a wreck you were when we first met, you've really turned yourself around. I wish I could borrow some."

"You do? You'd think differently if you could see the world from inside of me."

"What an intriguing idea? But have you not noticed how much easier your class is these days?"

"They've calmed down a bit, I suppose."

She smiles, then remembers herself, remember why she's here. "Tell me why I shouldn't demand proof that you're married to this girl? It should be recorded. She's your legal next of kin, after all."

"Well for a start she not a girl. She's as old as you. All right, that makes her still a bit too young for me, but not beyond the bounds of possibility. As for proof... you can ask for it. Go ahead. There is no proof. Recorded. Official. Next of Kin. Legal. These are just words to me, Davinia. I've fallen off the edge of the world... and I don't give a

damn about words like that any more."

"Well... at least she's restored some of your spirit. And also seems to be ironing your shirts."

"Eh? Oh... no... there's a shop in town does that for me. It's not that sort of relationship."

She leans against my desk, settling in, her curiosity bubbling, and she seems to be in the mood for savouring more of my indiscretions, but I want her to go. She makes me feel... vulnerable. But to what? Attack, or merely truth?

She sighs. "You could have had '*not that sort of relationship*' with me you know?"

"And that would have put us both on the same side of the desk in there, Davinia, with the vicar and Grizelda tar-and-feathering the pair of us."

"Would I have cared? You think you're such a rebel don't you? How old are you? And you're only just waking up to the fact that the world is completely mad, and you're the only sane person in it? I've known that since I was sixteen. But you can't break their rules, or they will crush you. You have to know the rules, Richard, know them better than *they* do, then you can play them to your own advantage."

"I know.... I'll be careful."

"You said you wanted me, and, really, you *could* have had me. I wasn't just teasing you."

"You know why I couldn't be with you – I mean... not the way you wanted."

"Yes, yes." She's tapping her toes, and tightly coiling her hair again, her eyes sliding away. "There's no point dwelling on it now, is there?"

"Davinia, look, I know this doesn't seem the right moment, but... are you feeling okay?"

"What? No... of course I'm not. This is a stressful job, and you're not making things any easier with tales of your hanky-panky in the woods, spreading all over the village."

"That's not it. You love this job. You live for it. There's something else."

"All right, I know, but just... don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't try to be... you know... *sympathetic*... with me."

"No one ever gets to see the real you, do they?"

She glares a warning at me. "Don't go there, Richard!"

"You've been playing their rules for too long. Try making up a few of your own for a change. It's okay to feel sad. Okay to feel *compassion* for others. Okay to *feel* and to be... *tender*."

"Yes,.. well. I think we've said enough. It strikes me you've no idea what you're doing at all, but then I can hardly claim to have a monopoly on common sense, can I? I owe you... a lot... and I'll protect you as long as I can."

She really means that!

"Em... thank you."

She's biting her lip now. "I'll still expect you at Church however.... will you be bringing?.."

Fishing for a name Davinia? "I'll be there, of course. But no, I won't be bringing anyone"

Her toe is tapping louder now. She seems to be unaware of it. And then it strikes me: *he's still bothering you isn't he?*

"I'll see you then. And Richard, try to be earlier will you? You've been slipping in at the last minute lately."

Chapter 31

Spring: a time for action, or for being acted upon. It is when the course of the year takes hold and can no longer be shaken from its purpose. I do not know what its purpose is, and can only sense a growing unease as I await the dread knowledge of it.

I'm sure I have not returned to my country, to Durleston, to live like this. Had I returned to live, truly live, then surely I would have picked another path, taken my work more seriously, paid a deposit on a proper house with mod-cons, and found myself a woman whose middle name was not danger, a woman whose name could have been written with impunity on the Electoral Register.

But Lillian is a secret. She is something not quite real. She is a secret already told, already exposed to scrutiny. How can this end well? I must remind myself constantly that I can only walk this path by refusing to consider endings at all, by refusing to think beyond today, beyond the *now*.

I'm pondering all of this as I sit with my father. Chelsea brings tea. I understand the ritual of the teacup and the saucer now. She does this not to make a fool of me, of course, but because she values me. She is honouring me, as Lillian often does, with the bringing of a teacup and saucer. It's a simple thing, but in doing it, Chelsea says I am worth it. It's wrong to make a virtue out of one's ego, wrong to think we are special above all others, but equally it is wrong to think ourselves beneath contempt. We each have to find a way of looking in the mirror and being at peace with ourselves.

"How are you feeling these days, Mr Hunter?"

"A little better, thank you."

"Did you see the doctor?"

"I did, yes."

Chelsea is an old fashioned sort of girl. She would like nothing better than to care for a man, to cook for him, to iron his shirts, and become sweetly submissive at the first sign of his carnal needs. And she would do this gladly in return for his protection, for his kindness, and his love. There *are* still girls like this, but who perhaps feel ashamed to admit even to themselves this is the way they want to be. And men are also confused, thinking they should not think of girls that way any more, not knowing that *some* girls, might want them to.

I'm thinking were she but a little older Chelsea might be just the uncomplicated soul-mate a bruised and confused man like me might need, someone to help him reassemble bit by bit the shards of his self esteem. Whenever I see her I think of a clean duvet and central heating, a squeaky clean kitchen floor, a sparkling bathroom, and a comforting softness, like a pillow into which a man could sink his weary brow at night. Chelsea would be a woman to live for, and seeing her reminds me that I have not come back to Durleston to live at all.

I have indeed come back to die.

My father seems lost, not merely introspective, but sucked so deep inside of himself his body lies propped in the chair like a puppet whose strings have been cut, the skin of his face and his hands drawn tight and transparent over his bones.

Chelsea has laid out the chess-set, as usual, but the game seems confused now. This is not a game from her book of classic tournaments. It is more of a parody. Several pieces are exposed to capture on both sides – indeed both sides seem poised for an annihilation that has gone overlooked for several moves. A single moment of common sense, of clarity, would wipe the board clean, but who the victor would be here is beyond me. This would surely have agitated my father once, but now he sits passively. I challenge a rook with a pawn – a sacrifice to bring on the slaughter – but my father does not blink.

"He seems so far away tonight."

"Yes," she tells me. "He can be like this for hours, then return as bright as a button again."

"Can he hear us?"

"I don't know, Mr Hunter. I think perhaps he can, but not in a way that makes sense to him any more."

She walks me to the door, as is her habit and we share a quiet moment in the cool of the porch. It's raining a little and its freshness restores me. I turn and give her a smile. "Will it be long now, do you think?"

"No, not long now."

"Weeks? Months?"

"Weeks, I think."

"You're very kind, Chelsea."

"It's my job, Mr. Hunter."

"You keep saying that. But one cannot pretend kindness, or

compassion. If you ask me, your years at Middleton Beacon School were not wasted at all."

"It's very nice of you to say so, but really they were."

I walk out into the night, and crunch my way over the gravel that once saw the Rolls-Royces of the cotton magnates. There was great disparity in those so-called glory days, and something akin to slave labour in the mills that made their owners rich. But was their world any worse than the one we live in now? There was great poverty, but nowadays, when they have the money to live comfortably, our young squander it on trinkets and other opiates, as if spared from the pain of their hungry stomachs they would sooner hide their minds in some other distraction, than face the meaning of their lives.

I climb into the car, and start it up, feeling childishly secure and cosy and superior as it lights up. The tank shows it's half empty. Petrol prices are at a record just now, though crude oil is at a record low. Suddenly there's talk of electric cars again, and solar power – but this sounds like such a flimsy, half -baked solution a return to horses and oil lamps would inspire more confidence in me.

I come down the track to the house, and my headlamps pick out the reflectors of a muddy off-roader. It's a little after dusk. Is it William? No. I know who it is, and I slam on the brakes in alarm. It's his *time,* you see? Dusk. He always comes at this time, at least on the rare occasions when he comes at all.

He's not been back in months of course, and the whole world has spun on its axis, entered a different zone entirely, but he expects it to be just the same. She could have starved to death. What kind of man could treat a woman that way?

Lillian. My God! Lillian.

He's there. A shadow, moving from around the back of the house, a flash-light parting the darkness. He's curious at the changes that have taken place. And now he sees me. I slide the window down a crack, and I wonder if he will recognise me.

"Can I help you?" I enquire.

It's almost funny. I remember this was his first line to me, not long ago. I resolve to be infinitely more polite than he was then, or as I assume he will be now.

He gives me the same dead eyes, chilling in their emptiness. "Who the fuck are you?" Still the proprietorial tone, I note. He does not recognise me in the car. He thinks I'm someone else, someone

richer, more powerful perhaps than a lone man on foot.

"I live here. Who are you?"

He looks around, calculating the changes, and ignores my question. "Since when?"

"Since January."

The place looks different. I have done so much work here, clearing, digging, tidying. It is transformed. Hopefully he will think I have swept everything away, including Lillian, that nothing of his remains here.

"I've come for my belongings."

He's dogged. Perhaps also a little stupid.

"I don't understand."

"I had some belongings here and I want them back."

"If you're the previous tenant, then I can only suggest you speak to the letting agent. I assure you the house was empty when I moved in. No furniture, no bits and pieces at all."

His dead eyes are hypnotic, snake-like. He's reading me, sniffing out the truth and finding me worthy of suspicion. "All right. But if you find anything here. It's mine. Got it?"

"What exactly are you looking for? Is there something *specific*?"

"You heard me,... *anything*. Whatever you brought with you is your own. Whatever you found here's mine. Right?"

"But there was nothing."

"So you said."

"If you could tell me..."

"I've told you. Right?"

And there's an end to it. I'm wondering if I can kill him – or at least prevent him from killing me. He would think nothing of throwing away a few thousand pounds in engaging a private detective to sniff around. And if Marsden is already throbbing with news of Mr Hunter's mistress, it would not take much by way of enquiry. How long then before a snapshot of said mistress is forwarded to her former Dom? I will *have* to kill him. Or run. But Lillian will not run! He might come for us tomorrow. Yes: tomorrow exists again! Calmness, quietude... serenity... these are just dreams now.

I remain in the vehicle while he drives away, then watch as his headlights flicker along the track, finally to disappear. It strikes me there may be some subterfuge in it, so I follow him, back to where the track joins the ring-road into Middleton. There's nowhere he

could have pulled off and lain in wait, thinking perhaps to double back and surprise me and Lillian together. He's truly gone, then. Never to return. I doubt that. He's only gone for now. Troubled, I return to the cottage.

"Lillian?"

The place is empty. She saw him coming, recognised his truck by the sound of it. How long would she have had to make the distinction between his vehicle and mine? A matter of seconds? Not much warning! She must have flown out of the back door, made her way to cover by the river. I take a lamp from the cabin and head out into the spectral darkness of Durleston.

"Lillian?"

How could she see in this blackness? Her eyes are no better than mine, and without the lamp I'm blind!

"Lillian?"

By degrees, I'm drawn to the belly of the wood, and this is where I find her, hugging her knees in the bivouac. Her face is scratched and bleeding from the branches she has blundered into.

"Adam?"

"Yes. He's gone now. He won't be back. You're safe."

"He'll come again. He always comes again. You think you're free of him and even though it means you're going to starve to death, you don't care, because freedom is everything... and then he comes, and everything is as it was."

I squeeze myself in, and curl my arms around her, but the warmth has gone. She's cold and stiff with fear. "No. Everything is different now."

"Is it? Not to him it's not."

"He knows the house isn't his to return to any more. He'll assume you've run off, escaped..."

"You don't know him. No one takes anything from him. These people... they are very primitive. Not like us, Adam. Not like normal people."

"Lillian, Lillian.... What are we doing? We *can* end this."

"How?"

"Declare ourselves to the authorities. Play by their rules. I know, they'll probably deport you, but I'll go with you, and we'll get married in your country. Then we can come back here, legally. And none can ever touch us again."

She's crying now, and laughing at the same time. "Adam, we are

so far outside of the rules..."

"No... we can *use* the rules."

"Are you proposing marriage to me?"

"Yes."

"You want to label me as your wife now?"

"It's their rules. We can be whatever we are. If we're together, what does it matter?"

"Adam, it is very noble of you, but I cannot."

"It's just a subterfuge,..."

"I am already married."

This is news! "Em... Could you explain that to me?"

"It's how my papers were arranged. I'm married to someone, an Englishman."

"To *him*?"

"No, no... I don't know who it was. I'd never seen him before, and I've not seen him since... He left, with my papers, my passport, and there was a car waiting for me, another man telling me there'd been a hitch and I would get my papers back, but first I had to do this one thing. And the one thing led to another and another, and suddenly I am a slave, passed from one dark place to the next, and knowing in my heart I will never see my papers, my life, my freedom again."

"Then you're not really married, Lillian... Look, we *have* to go to the police. There'll be other girls like you,..."

"Adam, Adam... There are policemen and officials among them. Powerful people. Which ones do we trust? How else do you think such things go undetected? Yes, there are girls like me... many... and now and then one is found in a back alley with her throat cut for so much as refusing to swallow. We are cheap. And there is no such thing as protection."

"It's not like that. You said yourself, my country is not like that."

"The part you live in, yes. I saw it once. It was a lovely place, but I fear I shall never see it again. The part I live in is just the same as every other hell on earth."

"I said I'd try to protect you."

"And I know you *mean* those words in your heart, and I have faith in you, but you have never encountered evil. These people are demons, capable of anything. They are all damned to a violent end, because that is the hell on earth they choose to live in, but they also damn anyone they touch, anyone their dead eyes linger on for more

than a moment. I am damned. Be careful you are not also."

"Too late for that, I think. I came back to die. We'll die together."

"Words, Adam. You do not know your own self. You did *not* come back to die." She smiles. "Oh, but listen to me, revealing the trap, having lured you into it."

"I knew what I was doing."

She strokes my hand in the darkness. "How long before your grass grows?"

"What? Oh... a few more weeks I think."

"Then tomorrow you must drive me into town, and give me some more money."

"Okay."

"Better still, would you trust me with your credit card and pin number?"

"Of course."

"It's time I picked my summer dress. I would like it to be a good one."

"All right. But beyond that... no tomorrows."

She nods. "No tomorrows. I take them, and I throw them all away."

I make to lead her out of the bivouac, but she shakes her head. "No. Turn out the lamp. Let's sleep here, and show the night-ghosts we are not afraid of them any more."

Chapter 32

Davinia is growingl increasingly distracted. When I first knew her she would hang upon the vicar's words as if his every syllable were an epiphany. I know this was an act, on account of our mutual atheism, but it was a calculated affectation, unlike this inward reflection now, which is genuine, and worrying. It is as if she hears voices in her head and we, in the real world, are mere distractions.

I arrive earlier now at Church, as she has requested, though as yet I have not suspected the reason for it. This morning is different though. I enter alone. She has not yet come, and I am staggered by the sight of Blinkhorn, looking very dapper, standing in the doorway. He does not remember me, and reads my stare as starry eyed adulation perhaps, because he graces me with an oily smile. There are two similarly suited gentlemen beside him, immaculately groomed and stony-faced, hands clasped over their genitals as if they expect to be kicked for their association with him.

But I'm not thinking of Davinia now. I'm thinking of Lillian, terrified the devil will take her while I'm gone. We have come close to a row this morning – me not seeing the sense in leaving her in order to come to this place, and she insisting that I go, because it continues to be expected of me, and she assures me she will be all right. She will hide herself in the bivouac. I order her to allow me to stay, but she smiles defiantly. She is only my slave when she wants to be.

I take my seat in the empty pew, shortly to be joined by Grizelda, who appears to be dressed for a garden party, or a wedding, complete with hat. Is she insane? She sits to my left, the brim of her hat invading my space, and her flowery scent is overwhelming. This is Davinia's place, but it seems silly to mention it. Then Davinia arrives. Her entrance is announced by an exaggerated masculine guffaw from the back of the church, and an exchange of bonhomie so false that even Grizelda turns her head and wrinkles her brow in disdain. Davinia's steps are hurried, and when she sits to my right, I can see her blouse fluttering alarmingly as her heart attempts to self-destruct. Her eyes are sliding from side to side like a hunted animal's.

"Are you all right, Miss Barkwell?"

No time to reply.

Blinkhorn slides into the pew beside her. There is another oily smile, his trademark it seems, which she ducks and I end up catching. The atmosphere is tense. One of the stony-faced gentlemen takes a seat to the right of Blinkhorn, so that we must all move up one place. The other stony-faced gentleman sits behind. I almost fear it might be a mob hit, except Blinkhorn is a member of parliament... isn't he?

Davinia grabs my arm. "Swap places, Richard."

I obey at once, find myself briefly in closer contact with her than I have ever been before, the downside being I am now squashed uncomfortably close to our honourable member. There follows a moment of confusion as the stony-faced gentleman on the end stands to allow Blinkhorn to slide away from me, and the stony-faced gentleman takes his place. It's a farce, and I expect at any moment to hear the congregation behind us tittering at our performance. The stony-faced gentleman pushes into me a little to make more space, and something under his jacket jabs painfully in my ribs so that I move still further away.

He's carrying a gun?

I take it he is not a criminal, and suppose he must therefore be some sort of policeman. I raise my eyebrows at him in horror, but he faces front and ignores me. If I had bothered to keep up with the news, I might have heard that Blinkhorn had just been invited to join the high table of government and therefore, as such, he now qualifies for armed protection. You'll forgive my cynicism if I tell you he seems keen to show his protection off this morning.

Davinia is shaking her head as if she's feeling woozy. I catch her hand in alarm as she slumps into my shoulder, though I know she has not really fainted. Grizelda is awakened to the potential for gossip and enquires if she is all right. Davinia ignores her, takes my arm again, and whispers in my ear.

"Get me out of here!"

So I rope Grizelda in as an unlikely accomplice, and between us, we exit left and spirit the unsteady Davinia away. Grizelda, to her credit is a staunch ally in preserving Davinia's dignity, and holds her as if they had been girlfriends since school. Then we are in the fresh air, the organ is piping up behind us, and Grizelda is looking at me as if to say this is woman's business now and I can clear off. But Davinia is looking at her as if to say it's not, and the three of us are standing there in a kind of stalemate, so Davinia says she's

feeling a little better and she'll perhaps walk a short distance to get some air. Grizelda returns, and not knowing Davinia's intentions, I make to follow Grizelda, but Davinia catches my arm and holds me back, then doubles over and vomits copiously against the church wall.

She's looking at me now, ashamed that I have seen her vomit. I offer her my handkerchief and turn my back, that she might recover her dignity and I'm surprised to see there is a stony-faced gentleman looking at me now. I smile, stupidly, because I find his presence surreal.

"It's all right," I tell him. "My colleague has recently discovered she suffers from... a severe allergy."

Davinia links arms with me, pulls me away, and we walk together along the pavement. She's breathing strangely, deeply, as if trying to stave off another vomiting fit. I don't know what to do, what to say, so I simply walk with her. There is a splash of vomit on her skirt and she tries to hide this from me by shortening her stride. I want to tell her I am an old married man and have held many a head while it spewed into a lavatory, that these things do not matter to me. But they do to Davinia, and I must respect this.

She pulls up sharp, takes a deep breath, then turns and we walk the other way.

"Surely," I tell her, "you're not going back in?"

She shakes her head violently.

"Going back to the flat?"

She nods.

"Did you know he was coming?"

Another shake of the head. "I had a note, he... hinted that he might... sometime."

"Does he even know how much he frightened you?"

She bristles: *he did not frighten me, he did not hurt me,* she's saying. *It did not happen.*

"Davinia... he's got policemen with him. They're carrying guns."

"What?"

"Never mind... I'm a bit confused by the whole thing."

"You're confused!"

"Go back to the flat."

"All right. Come with me?"

"What? Em..."

I have a woman waiting in the woods, a fatalistic glint in her

eye while she thumbs the blade of a knife. I can go nowhere.

"Sorry," she says, crestfallen. "I'm forgetting... you have other responsibilities now. It's all right. I can manage. It was stupid of me."

She's ashamed, ashamed she asked! Could it be that underneath the fancy airs, she actually thinks very little of herself? Could it be that she demands cooperation, because she is afraid to merely seek it, afraid others think she is unworthy of their cooperation? Their love? Their tenderness?

I see her to the car and open the door for her, all beneath the watchful eye of the stony-faced gentleman who now stands guard by the church, in case the residents of Marsden decide to mount an assault.

She drives off.

I stare after her for a while, haunted by this feeling... that I want to help her, help her see that it's okay to be afraid... but I cannot. I cannot engage with her. We are too different, our fates too far apart.

I cannot go back to Durleston yet because I have left my Mackintosh in the pew, but I do not want to disturb the service by going inside for it. Instead, I take a deep breath, then go and stand beside the stony-faced gentleman, and neither of us say a word. Now I understand why Davinia wanted me in church early. She wanted to make sure I would always be between her and Blinkhorn, if he ever showed up. She must have been dreading the possibility for weeks.

I have the impression these gentlemen are charged with covering Blinkhorn's worthless hide. Lillian's worth ten of him, but not eligible for any form of protection, nor even charity it seems. I decide I can live without the Mackintosh, so I turn my collar and head for home, my stomach queasy with disgust.

Chapter 33

I am no longer afraid of the woods at night. Lillian has convinced me the only ghosts here are the ones we carry inside our heads, and we make of them whatever we want. We begin roaming there after dark, she and I, so that we come to know it both in daylight and as a black vacuum in which the night sounds are a source of wonder: badgers, bats, foxes... and deer. We take a small lamp with us, the wick turned low, so it gives out hardly any light, and as the days grow warmer, we are minded to swim in the waters of the Rye.

So...

Now I am sitting by the river on a warm spring night, and Lillian is about to lift the hem of her dress. I take delight in watching her do this, because she is very lovely. She dresses well these days, choosing for herself clothes that betray a feminine sophistication, and a delicate charm. Also something unashamedly sexy.

Suddenly she hesitates and cocks her ears like a cat at sounds that are below the level of human hearing. She looks at me, then lowers the dress. Her eyes flit from side to side. I feel it too. There is an unfamiliar flow to the air and I have the eerie feeling of being stared at.

She crouches low and motions with her eyes to the lamp. I reach over and turn it out. She comes to me and together, we lay prone in the grass our noses among the bluebells, and we listen. All we can hear is the river. I place my hand upon her hot back, gesture for her to follow, and we creep into the deeper blackness of the wood, stepping on the sides of our soles to minimise the noise of our passing, flexing carefully the branches in our path, so we do not break them. Thus, shadow like, we settle away from the river into silence, so that we might listen properly to the night.

There is nothing now. But we are crouched close together, embraced, so that I can see over her shoulder and she over mine, and in the middle our hearts collide, each of them spooked by the other's alarm.

"That was not a friendly ghost," she says, whispering into my ear.

"It was nothing."

"You felt it. It was *not* nothing." Her breath is hot and sweet. Her hands are cradling my head. There is anxiety in her touch, the sense

perhaps our days are numbered even fewer now. We sink down into the earth once more, into the scent of it, where we embrace and move not an inch until the dawn comes shivering. If I am to die I cannot think of anyone I would rather die with.

As soon as there is light enough to see, I check the bivouac. We are cold, our clothes wet with dew, our chests thick with it so that we cough and our voices are heavy. We are both too old to be playing this kind of game.

The tell tale thread is broken! And ghosts do not break threads.

"A deer," I tell her, but her expression is grave. We both know it was not a deer.

"They know I'm here," she says. She holds her hand to her throat, and I am reminded that she has taken to carrying my knife with her – and not for self defence. A quick draw of the curved blade across her throat would end things soon enough.

"There could be any number of explanations, Lillian. It could even have been William."

The knife is hung around her neck, looped upon a piece of string so that it nestles in her bosom. She touches it, as if to make sure it's still there. This frightens me because I know what she's thinking of whenever she does it.

"William is a farmer with big boots and a barking dog," she reminds me. "What we felt last night was a cross between a man and a snake."

I shudder at the thought of Durleston possessed by demons – but her former Dom is not a stealthy man. He has a snake's eyes but not a snake's stealth, though such skills can always be hired, I suppose. I wonder how quickly she can draw the knife, unfold it and slide it across her neck. Has she practised it? I would not have the courage, even if my tormentors were dragging me away to an unspeakably vile servitude or a bullet in a darkened alley, I would always hope, and hope is the enemy of that particular last resort.

Lillian *would* do it though. I am sure of it.

"Can I suggest a hot bath?"

She smiles. "Adam, you are so English."

"And when the day warms up a bit. Why don't you try on your new frock?"

She brightens. "All right."

"I'm making the best of things, that's all. I don't know what else to do."

"Making the best of things. Yes, this is a good expression."

A pale sun slants in yellow beams through the mist that now hangs over the Rye. Each footfall is deliberate, as we make our way back to the house, and once more we are compelled to savour every moment of what might be our last day, our last hour, our last moment – for any of the shadows here might yet reveal the hunter, the half-man, half-snake who will take us.

We make it as far as the house.

The grass is too thin yet to give even the illusion of a lush green sward. It will in time, but that time seems impossibly far away, so that I am assured now only future tenants of this queer old house will enjoy the vision of what we once dreamed here.

Lillian puts on her summer dress. It is gossamer thin, and as she walks out towards the river I can see through it to the outline of her body. Her hair shines with the fertile lustre of a much younger woman. It is luxuriously thick and dark, this hair that has sent shivers of delight coursing through me as it has brushed my skin these past long and lovely nights. She keeps her hat in place against the breeze by holding it there, a hand pressed lightly to the top of her head. She does not really need the hat because the sun is as yet too weak to make us feel the need for shade. For now we must imagine the heat of high summer. It is our only defence against the tingling chill of this suddenly unripe season.

I hold back, because I want to watch her. We hope the summer will yet come and allow us this moment for real, but for now we must face the truth that this rehearsal is the best we will ever manage. She sits at the old table. I have put down cushions on the rotten chairs so she will not spoil her frock. Like so much that we do here it feels like an act of defiance. The look of her! It's what? So lovely, so delicate, so decent... so romantic! It is as if by this act we want to chase away the demons by shining the light of goodness upon them, so that they will take fright at our innocence, and shrink away.

The sun graces us with a sprinkle of gold upon the brown waters of the Rye. I sit beside her and ask her how it feels.

"Adam, it is so lovely."

"You deserve better."

"What could be better?"

"A normal life. A nice house. More time."

"We have a nice house. As for normal, what is normal?"

"More time then..."

She takes my hand and presses it tenderly. "If we had more time we would only waste it."

There is some truth in this.

"A husband. Babies?"

"Now you are teasing me. I am too old for both of those things"

"No."

"Also, I already have a husband. You know this."

"A real one, I mean."

She smiles bashfully. But she does not want me for her husband. A breeze moves through the forest. Boughs creak and Lillian must suddenly catch hold of her hat to prevent it from blowing away. I listen, thinking it has more the sound of autumn in it, rather than the softness of spring. Branches strain like dry old bones.

She's watching me, reading me, not understanding... Suddenly afraid, she squeezes my hand: "Adam?"

"Hmm?"

"Is it not enough that I... please you?"

"Please me? You fill me, Lillian. So much of my life was empty before. You were right when you said it: I might think I did not want this, but I needed it. So... yes,... yes. It's enough. More than enough."

She smiles. "I did not really think that you would stay with me. It seemed too much to hope I might win you, when I can offer you so little. Why did you do it, really? Why did you come?"

"I let you down once, long ago. I wanted to show you I wouldn't do it again."

She's puzzled. "Are we talking of a past life, now?"

"Something like that."

"Well, whatever it was, I forgive you for it."

Meanwhile something is floating down the river: a supermarket carrier bag. It slithers over the ripples like a gaudy jellyfish and in my mind it trails after it a haze of corruption. It renders Durleston of a sudden tired and old, the scrappy remains of a place that should have died long ago – no longer an heroic relic from some lost Arcadia, but simply ridiculous.

It should not feel like this in May – not when there are carpets of bluebells and the little starry heads of pungent ramsons are opening, but I wonder now if spring will just turn back to autumn, and if Durleston will die again for the last time. She's watching me

as I scan the woodland. I've been doing it for some time now. She strokes my arm and lays her head upon my shoulder, then tells me softly:

"You will not see it coming, Adam."

Chapter 34

Mrs Crabtree is sixty two. She has a face that relaxes naturally in a way that conveys displeasure. She tuts and sighs – mannerisms we on the staff read as impatience with what she sees as our inferior ways. I find I am in no mood to psychoanalyse her. If she has vulnerabilities that make her this way I find I am happy not to go looking for them.

The girls call her names behind her back, but to her face they are cringingly and shamefully deferential. She tuts at me now, and then she sighs. She has important minutes to write up and I am standing at her desk, asking for a badge that says my name on it. This is ridiculous, but without my badge the school procedures dictate I should not be on the premises, because I might be a dangerous stranger wearing a rubber-mask disguise, wanting to abduct children. I have left my badge at home, you see?

"But you should not have taken it home, Mr Hunter."

This is true. The procedures would tell me this, I suppose, but I have not read them. They consist of several thousand sheets of densely worded A4, and I really do not have the time, nor the inclination to memorise them. I wonder if it's expected of us. I wonder if Davinia can quote them back to me blindfold.

I should have left my badge in the rack Mrs Crabtree keeps by her desk. This way she knows who is and is not in, before they ring with their grovelling excuses. Normally I would smile, and trot out an apology, but I am not in the mood for Mrs Crabtree this morning. Lillian is waiting in the house alone for the devil to take her. Meanwhile, Mrs Crabtree is creating a drama out of trifles.

"Will you make me a new badge or not?" My voice has an edge to it, like the knife Lillian hides in her bosom. My impatience surprises us both.

It will take ten seconds to print a piece of paper with my name and picture on it, and slip it into the plastic wallet with the clip. But her stubbornly self-important manner tells me she will not do it, not right away, and certainly not at my bidding.

"I shall have to speak with Miss Barkwell," she tells me.

I wish she would, for then I might be rewarded with the much promised spectacle of Davinia stabbing her through the neck with the heel of her stiletto.

Mrs Crabtree waits.

I wait.

"So... are you going to speak with her or not?"

"As soon as she comes off the telephone."

I feel angry and humiliated, so I take a piece of paper from her desk, write my name on it, draw a big frowny face beside it, fold over the top of the paper and tuck it into my breast pocket.

"You could perhaps inform me of Miss Barkwell's decision later on?"

I have never stuck two fingers up at Mrs Crabtree before. I normally consider it beneath me, but I do it now – metaphorically speaking of course. I would never actually stick two fingers up at a lady. Or a man for that matter. Heavens.

The children find my badge amusing.

So does Davinia, which is odd because I had always supposed she was without a sense of humour.

I'm in the playground. It's lunchtime and the rain has dried up. The air is filled with the full volume squeals of several hundred children at their leisure, making a mess of their shoes by splashing in puddles. I have not the heart to stop them even though the dinner ladies have warned me there'll be hell to pay at home-time when the parents see the state of their offspring. But all they want to do is splash in puddles and I am tempted to similarly lift my spirits by joining in with them.

I'm cold, my mind flipping between my charges, and the thought of a woman lying in a pool of blood when I get back. Also, strangely, the thought of a daughter lost to a life of sin, in some hellish urban backwater, and a son stepping on a tripwire that might take his legs, and so far away, I cannot help him. And it may already have happened, so what good does it do to reconnect with it, now? Surely it's better not knowing.

My God what's happening to me? When did I become so... passive?

"I'm afraid it's a poor likeness, Mr Hunter." Davinia's holding out a mug of tea for me. This is also unexpected.

"A poor likeness you say?"

"The frowny face," she explains.

"Oh... I would have thought it the perfect likeness of a depressive."

"Not at all. Frowny faces are generally just useless whiners.

You'd have been better drawing the lips in with a straight line. Inscrutable. Unknowable. Armoured. Then I might have recognised you instantly. But this..." she gestures to the badge. "This is not you at all. You are growly and grumpy, Mr Hunter. Mrs Crabtree has even complained to me that you were abusive to her. If I wasn't so impressed I would have to tell you off about it."

"Mrs Crabtree? Don't tempt me."

"I've been watching you, Richard."

"That makes a change."

"You see? How grumpy you are! Anyone would think you did not love me any more."

Was that a hint of a smile? Is she... teasing me?

"Miss Barkwell – children have big ears and loose tongues."

"Yes... but such a delightful innocence, don't you think?"

"Tell me, have you been teaching long?"

"I'll ask you this just once, not that I expect you to answer truthfully."

"Oh?"

"Are you in trouble?"

"Of course not."

She nods. "That tells me everything I need to know."

"Look, I'm sorry if I've been... morose recently. It's true, I have things on my mind. I'll try to do better."

Davinia is perhaps thinking things are not working out so well as I had hoped, with my internet bride. Is she pleased by this? And if she is pleased, what does it mean? I discover I would like to talk to her, confess all to her, have her somehow save me, and Lillian from what is surely coming. This is an unexpected, possibly insane thought, and very dangerous, so I strike it from my mind immediately.

"I shall apologise to Mrs Crabtree, of course."

She takes a cheeky sip from the cup before handing it over. "Don't you dare," she tells me, then walks away.

At that moment, Rufus Donnoley and Lizzy Sitwell collide. They bang heads, then Lizzy goes down and grazes her knee. Davinia steps around her, looks back pointedly at me, and I step in. I notice Davinia does not walk away as she might once have done, after delegating responsibility, but holds herself stiffly aloof and looks on awkwardly.

Lizzy is howling. Rufus is on the verge of it, his grubby face

about to buckle. He's not hurt – just upset that he has hurt someone else. At what point, I wonder will he grow out of this? Perhaps Davinia is right. There is something amoral in their ways, but beneath it an innocence I wish we could hold onto as we grow.

If it were my knee, I'd press my handkerchief to it, but I cannot touch Lizzy without opening myself up to ridiculous charges of abuse. All I can offer her are comforting platitudes, while I wait for the appointed first aider to come, who similarly can do little else but wait for the thing to stop bleeding of its own accord, while deciding whether or not it merits a Medevac to Middleton A&E. And while we wait, Davinia steps in, kneels down to Rufus and shocks me with her smile, for there is a sympathy in it, struggling to break through, but a sympathy all the same.

"It's all right, Rufus," she tells him. "It was an accident."

Rufus blinks, uncertain – and clearly as puzzled as I am to hear such a sweetness coming from Miss Barkwell's lips. Is it a trick? She's aware of our consternation and jumps up, embarrassed, as if she expects us to start laughing at her. I notice how her long hair brushes Rufus's face. He's startled by it – thinks perhaps he has heard the voice of angels, and been touched by their wings.

Meanwhile I wince, and wonder at what point I should tell her, Rufus has more head lice than can be accommodated on his scruffy, unwashed head, and that by now, a goodly number of them will have hitched a ride on Davinia. It does not matter how brightly we shine our image, you see? We shall always end up being tarnished by life.

I *will* apologise to Mrs Crabtree. She will see it as a weakness, but I can't help her with that. For me there is a greater dignity in it, and small things are important now.

It seems a small thing too, when Davinia calls me into her office in the middle of the afternoon, sending a teaching assistant to cover my class. She has the telephone in her hand. She's pressing it to her brow and appears to be struggling again with ripples of emotion. She looks up as I enter, bites her lip: "Richard. It's the care home... your father..."

I take the telephone.

A soft vortex comes from a point in time, long distant, and opens out into a future of uncertain emptiness, and I am struck by the feeling there is no longer a generation between me and my own death any more. I listen to the voice on the telephone explaining

the facts of the matter. It's the Matron, though I had hoped it would be Chelsea. I sit down uninvited, thinking Davinia will forgive my familiarity this once. She's eyeing me awkwardly, wondering perhaps if I shall cry. I won't. Not with her. I shall cry later, in Durleston, by the beech tree, with Lillian's arm around me, her face snuggled into my neck.

I give her back the telephone. "My father has passed away." I tell her.

"Yes."

"I'd better..."

"Of course...yes..."

"Get back to my class."

"What? No, Richard... Go home."

"I'm fine. There's nothing I can do just yet."

"Go home..."

I nod, thank her, and make to leave, not sure where my path leads from here. She's around the desk in a flash and catches my sleeve. For one confused moment I think she's about to embrace me. I don't know if I'm delighted by the prospect or horrified – but she just stands there, trying to read me.

"Richard, why didn't you say?"

"Say what?"

"That your father was so ill. I understand now. I'm sorry. Go... go. But you should have said."

It's as I'm walking home I am overcome by the feeling that being comforted by Davinia is like being wrapped in sandpaper. She cannot do it, but something *has* changed in her. She has become conscious of herself which is the first step in wishing she could be something other than what she is. Is it better then to derive strength from a deluded version of yourself, or to collapse into weakness at your inevitable frailty? The only certain thing in life is that it will get you in the end, and it seems all the business in between is nothing more than a game of useless posturing. It doesn't matter how you play it, so long as you discover a way of deluding yourself that you are happy in the meantime.

Chapter 35

I'm in the church yard at Marsden C. of E., dark suited, white shirted, black tied. Chelsea puts her hand on my arm in parting. There are no tears from her – more a picture of serenity and understanding. She has seen all of this before and approaches it with a maturity beyond her years. She's what? Twenty One, Twenty Two? I was a child at that age. This is a woman.

"Take care, now. Mr. Hunter."

She really means this. "And you Chelsea."

I'm still puzzled by the meaning of this lovely young woman, for I am convinced now more than ever that all encounters with others are personally meaningful. I regret I shall not be visiting Marsden Hall any more, that I shall probably never see her again.

Meaning!

What am I talking about?

There is life, and there is death. There is a constant renewal and the old matters not a jot. And I am growing old. *What I am none cares or knows... I am the self consumer of my woes.* Who said that? Ah... Clare – *the grass below – above the vaulted sky*. *The shipwreck of my life's esteems...* and all that. There was a man who understood emptiness! And who am I to think things are any different? We think we are the first to walk this way, but there's always someone who has gone before.

There are many old parishioners here, crinkled faces, like photographs of people I vaguely remember, but which I screwed up and tossed away long ago, and have now dredged up from the bottom of the bin one last time. They come at me like ghastly old relics, husks of their former selves, ghouls from my past, tortured and all but obliterated by their own lives. They come in sympathy, some out of curiosity, some merely to gawp at Lillian.

I had not thought she would come, had not thought even to ask her until she asked to borrow my credit card again, in order to buy a suitable outfit. She would like to come, she told me, if it was all right with me, that she wanted to. She wanted to be with me, she said, because for all of the strangeness of our relationship, she was my lover, my woman, and for those reasons alone she should be there.

It is significant she's here in other ways too, significant how she

stands aside, almost hidden by the rhododendrons. People are taking a sideways look at her, but keep their distance and she looks back, unafraid. She is like a pebble washed up and gleaming darkly on the shores of this little place, confident she will not need to make any friends, because the tide will wash her out again soon enough.

They all go, one by one, the Reverend Whitman being the last. He knows there is something in me now that he's happier not uncovering. It is a belief in something that does not sit at all well with his own convictions, and his convictions are not flexible enough to accommodate mine. The church-service readings never did transpire, and I do not blame him. If he had his way I would not be the school's R.E. Coordinator for long, and probably not even a teacher.

He smiles, offers me his meaningless sympathy. He did not know my father, and by this afternoon will have forgotten his name, though he has just spoken it so very tenderly. The words he read over my father were vague, one-size fits all words, words he's used a hundred times before. But it doesn't matter, and I see no shame in it. My father is no longer here...

I wish him well, and God speed. With love and thanks.

I turn to Lillian now. She takes my arm and we begin to make our way out of the churchyard. We are by the gate and glancing back and I'm struck by the rows of tombstones, amid them the fresh earth of my father's grave. There is so much agedness here... so much that does not seem to fit or matter any more. The memories I have of him, and of Durleston, and of the gun... what are they to you? Why do I think it's important I speak to you of these things? They are metaphors, loose and flitting like shadows through the dappled sunlight of the forest. You must make of them what you can but they *are* important if no other reason than you are reading this book and it shall be the only contact between us, and all contacts between people near or far, are significant.

"Adam, what is it?" she asks.

"I don't know, Lillian... it's just..."

"Tell me."

"What am I supposed to have done with my life? I'm assuming there must be *something*, but I can't see it, and I feel like a failure because I can't work it out, and everything else I've touched has been a disaster."

"Oh,.. Adam. Love and goodness and innocence. These are the only things that matter. They are the best we are capable of. But we undervalue them, and we wear ourselves out in chasing after their shadows, not realising we've possessed them all along."

"Come away with me. Away from Durleston, away from Marsden... there's nothing here for us."

She smiles indulgently. "It sounds so lovely, but you know it's too late."

"We can disappear. I've been thinking about it..."

"We've discussed this. I asked a demon for help once, and he will exact his price. I will breathe the air of Durleston for as long as I can... but I will not let him take me. Your father is dead. Your purpose here is fulfilled. You may leave me if you wish. I will not think ill of you. You might still make something of your life, you know? It depends if you want to or not."

Do I? Is it even possible that at this late stage I might yet make something useful of myself? Am I not useful already then? How does one measure human usefulness? Oh, give it a rest, Richard. Lillian's right: love and goodness and innocence – these are the best things we can aspire to.

"I remember looking at you once," I tell her. "We were children, sitting in a pool of sunshine in that school over there. I felt something in that moment. There was the whole of life in it, but I threw it away because I was a coward. I betrayed you, but I won't do it again."

"It was not *me*, Adam. And anyway, even if it was, and we are talking in metaphorical riddles again, then I have already told you, I forgive you for it."

We are in the car now, driving back into Middleton where we'll pick up the track that leads into Durleston's shades. We could have walked from the house to the church yard in twenty minutes, but we did not want to get mud on our shoes, because it was my father's funeral and he was deserving of shiny shoes.

I take the long way round and I drive slowly, enjoying the fact of her presence. Her clothes make her seem almost normal – a dark business suit underneath a black woollen coat. She might be any one of the ordinary citizens of my country: smart, intelligent, hard working, sexy. But being with her makes the world seem unreal, like something played upon the virtual reality windscreen of my car.

She calls me Adam still, and this reminds me we engage on a level of pure being, that our labels are not the essential thing. To be with Lillian is to sink into a dream. It is to enfold oneself in her embrace and to be pulled down into the depths by the soft, seductive weight of her.

We come down the track slowly. Durleston is where we live, but it's also where I'm still morbidly convinced we're going to die. The house is pitifully vulnerable to a sneaking devil with a knife or a gun... or match and petrol. I don't know why I'm thinking this now. Neither of us admits to it, but the silence between us speaks of it all the same. And when we draw up to the house, like a premonition, there is a car with a man leaning against the bonnet, waiting. Lillian draws breath, and then she's fishing for the knife. But I'm quicker than she is and I have it in my fist before she's had the chance to click it open.

"Adam! Let go." She's clawing at my fist, slapping my arm. "Let go! Let go! Let go!"

I'm shocked by her fury, but eventually, she relaxes. I feel her go limp, and then she just stares out at him, as he stares back at her. There's nothing in her eyes – no hatred, none of the confusion of feelings one might experience for a former lover. Her eyes appear as dead as his.

There is no pretending any more. He knows she's here.

"Lillian, can you drive?"

"What? Yes,.."

"Then slide over behind the wheel, when I get out, and drive back up the lane, to the ring-road. Watch for his car, then come back to me. If I'm dead, then the future's up to you – but at least give me the chance to reason with him."

"I'm not going anywhere, Adam. If anyone's to die it will not be you. And you can't reason with him. He won't understand a word you say. He speaks another language entirely."

"All right... but I'm getting out of the car now. Promise me you won't do anything until I've spoken with him. PROMISE ME!"

She flinches, nods, I release the knife, back into her care, and slide out to meet him.

There's a smugness about him. "You lied to me," he says.

"I didn't lie."

"I asked if you had anything that belonged to me, and you said no."

"She was never yours in the first place."

He thinks for a moment: "I'll make this easy," he says. "She gets in my car, I drive away and you never see me again."

"And the alternative?"

"There isn't one."

"There's always an alternative. For a start, if you try to take her – and I mean if you so much as take one step in that direction – she'll kill herself. And believe me: she means it."

He's puzzled – and this surprises me. I had thought him incapable of doubt. "Why would she do that?" he asks.

"Obviously she'd rather die than go with you."

He recovers himself. "I don't know what she's told you, but it's all lies," he says. "I love her... you don't know the half it."

This is a revelation – I mean that such a creature as this can even utter the word *love* without choking on it. "It seems a shallow kind of love," I tell him.

"And what would you know about it? You can't believe a word she says. She makes things up... It's the way she is, I tell you; you never know where you are with her."

"Unlike you of course. I suppose you're being very open and honest with me?"

"What? Look, I know all about you, *Hunter*. You're an infant teacher in the village. You've been banging her for months and telling everyone you met her on the internet. You're a lightweight and a loser, and you've not the first idea what you're involved with here."

"Actually, I don't think you know me at all. As for what I'm involved with, I'm sure I don't have the full picture, but I have a fair idea. And if you were any smarter you'd also know the police were down here asking about you."

Was that a flicker in those dead eyes? Does he believe me? Can he afford not to take me seriously. He gives me a sneering smile, but it's not overly convincing. "Oh, and why would that be then?"

"They didn't say. But they had your picture. They wanted to know if I'd seen you. I told them I had, and as soon as you've gone I'll be ringing them to say I've seen you again."

He sees through me, now. Perhaps Davinia is right: my ears go red, when I am lying, and I have never banked so much on a lie before as this.

"Really?" he says: "And how did you explain *her* then?"

"I didn't have to. They weren't looking for her. They were looking for you."

"Oh, but I'm sure they'd like to know where she is, all the same."

"Why? Because she has no papers?"

"Is that what she told you? You're stupider than you look."

"Why do you want her back? Because you love her? Because she's worth money to you, or because you want to kill her?"

He seems genuinely confused. "What?"

"Or is this an old fashioned kind of honour thing?"

"Look, dick-brain, if I wanted her dead, it sounds like all I need to do is take a step over there a bit and she'll do the job for me, right? Then I drive away, all innocent like, and leave you in the shit, trying to explain a dead woman sitting in your car. So, if I really wanted her dead, and you stitched up, why am I still standing over here, all polite and harmless?"

He has a point, and really I don't know. I'm confused by it. I've not time to work it out either because a shadow emerges from the woods, and I see the gleam of a shot-gun. *Fuck!* I'm thinking he's brought someone with him, but then realise it's William. The gun is broken, the breech open. Casually, he pops a couple of cartridges in.

"Everything all right, Mr Hunter?"

"Em... fine thanks. This gentleman has lost his way. I was just directing him back up to the main-road."

William nods warily. "Aye... people have been known to disappear down here."

My nemesis blinks, and appears to be on the verge of backing down. I'm grateful for William's intervention, but I'm also afraid for him, and far from certain this will end well.

"I know where you live," he says. "And I will be back, at dead of night, crack of dawn, whenever you least expect me. And next time, I won't be leaving without her."

"She'll never wear your chains again."

"Yes she will. And she'll do it because I'll tell her to. And she'll be glad to do it, because that's what she's like. You... a man like you. You're no use to her at all. You won't last five minutes."

A man like me? I remember thinking something similar myself, a while ago, but it looks like I've managed to last more than five minutes after all. How did I do that? Was it the hanging on, or the letting go?

He drives away. I'm relieved of course, but I know it isn't over, and all I can think we've gained is just one more night together. William slips the cartridges from the gun and stands with me as we watch the vehicle bumping up the track.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mr Hunter. I think you need to watch yourself there."

"Yes, you're probably right, William. Thank you."

"I said he was quare bugger, didn't I?" He sighs. "You know, thinking about it, that track's a bit dodgy really. All those deep puddles and ruts. I mean you could get a puncture or anything couldn't you?"

What does he mean by this? "I suppose you could, yes."

"It would only take a piece of linoleum with a stout nail in it, say... scatter a few of them about, like?"

"It would?"

"Aye. Better you don't risk coming down that way. In case of punctures, I mean. Easier to turn up through the farm instead. I've been meaning to suggest it to you for a while."

"That's very... decent of you."

"And that lass of yours... must be lonely for her down here during the day, when you're out. I know she likes it quiet, but she'd always be welcome, up at the farm, you know? I mean, if she fancies a change. The wife would be glad of a natter."

"Again, that's very decent of you. I'll... suggest it."

"I'll be on my way then."

"Thanks and... William..."

"Don't worry Mr Hunter. Some things are best kept to ourselves, eh?"

"Em, quite."

"Mind how you go."

I watch him stroll away – an unlikely saviour. But I'm not comforted. He can spike the track, like he was hinting at, and I can drive up through the farm instead, but we need a better plan than that. It may be that my lie about the police will have the guy wondering if it’s worth the risk of showing his face around here again. It would give me pause for thought, for sure, but then I am not him.

No, I think I know what I have to do. I turn to face Lillian. She appears calm, sitting there in the car, but she knows the way of things, and I wonder what she's thinking as she stares so intently at

me. I'm wondering if she can read my thoughts, wondering too... if she will ever forgive me for what I am about to do.

Chapter 36

I'm watching Davinia. It's the school assembly, Monday morning. We've had the prayer and the excruciating recorder recital, and Mandy Phelps has had her hair tugged by Rachel Watkins, because it's her birthday. I don't know how this ritual has managed to find itself resurrected, but it isn't doing anything for my nerves. I was gripped with the most terrible anxiety when Mandy, gap toothed and giggling, called out Rachel's name, in case Rachel wasn't there.

Lillian and I have not slept in days, and I'm dead tired, deeply reflective, and irrational. We have held each other every night, while the hammock rocks us in vain, both of us straining our hearing above the rippling of the Rye for sounds that might betray the devil outside, come to avenge himself. But it's been weeks now. William has spiked the track. I've been up to inspect his handiwork, but for all of his ingenuity, and his curious desire to protect us, we're defenceless.

Davinia scratches her head. She's thinking it's her shampoo by now. She'll be cross when she finds out it's not. Appearances are everything to her. For one who likes to portray herself as urbane, she's quite old fashioned really, a little Victorian in her stiffness.

She catches me looking and raises a defiant eyebrow. I glance away, and focus instead on the mole at the back of Miss Grimshaw's neck, while she plays piano. She feels a shiver and adjusts her collar so I cannot see it any more. I have nowhere to rest my eyes; it seems I disturb everything I look at these days, press it in to giddy motion.

Meanwhile Miss Grimshaw bangs out a jarring hymn on the piano with the cracked tooth. I have a memory of singing to this same piano forty years ago, to the workaday strains of another Miss Grimshaw: tweed suited, stout hipped, and equally lead fingered. Can it really be the same piano? How can it have survived the years intact, to thump out its shallow head-splitting tunes, while so much else that was worthy of eternal preservation in the summer-land of my mind, now lies obliterated?

I retreat inside myself, plunge into the imagined scent of Durleston, the scent of the earth, and the river... and Lillian. I bring to mind the tender earnestness of her touch, when we make love, but the memory is now just one more metaphor of the dread

impermanence of things. It's full summer and Durleston overwhelms the senses, smothers out all the freshness of reason with its soporific heat. Its numbing energy thickens, becomes glutinous as the canopy takes on a deeper shade of green, and its shadows render less dense all sense of reality.

I've decided I must betray her.

Because I want to save her life.

It will be like falling into a machine. She'll be deported, but I have money, and I can go with her. I know she will be angry, and it will destroy everything we've dreamed of here – this dream of no tomorrows, this last stand, this nailing of colours, but I feel I am right in this, that at some point we have to wake up. We do *not* have to die, Lillian! We can walk back into the world with dignity and honour. She said we would not see it coming. Perhaps that's true, but equally, I'm thinking it might be better if we did not wait, if instead we took it by surprise.

It.

Fate.

It's gone five, and Davinia's watching me now through the doorway of my classroom. I should be making my way back to Lillian. I've tried to encourage her to befriend the people at Lomax's farm, to spend time there, but she calmly refuses and instead sinks only more deeply into herself. I'm holding back this evening because I'm investigating the state of my finances on my laptop, and I don't want Lillian to see me doing it, or she might be asking me why. I don't have a fortune to leave my children, and they'd probably spend it in a weekend anyway, but it's enough, I think, to do what I have to do.

Davinia comes inside for a closer look. "No home to go to, Mr Hunter?"

"Hmm?"

"Online banking? Is that not a little modern for you?"

"Modern? I'll have you know I worked on the team that wrote the software this bank uses."

"Really? That must have been a long time ago."

I'm not in the mood for fencing with her now, but something's on her mind, and this is how she warms herself up to it. She sneaks a peek at what I'm doing. "You're clearly being paid too much."

"Davinia, please..."

"You're not thinking of skipping the country are you?"

"Em... don't be silly. Just taking stock. Anyway, I don't have a passport, remember?"

She looks away – "Sorry... it's nosey of me." She pauses, bites her lip and then: "You went to Church on Sunday?"

"Em... yes. I noticed you didn't, nor the week before."

She arches her brow, but there's something playful in it. "Is that a reprimand, Mr Hunter?"

"Hardly. I... miss you, that's all."

"You do?" She smiles. "How sweet of you. But since you're already spoken for, is that not a little... inappropriate?"

Teasing! I can tell now when she's doing it – an almost imperceptible flick of her brow, and a twitch at the corner of her mouth as if she's snatching back the smile before it has a chance to give her away. Otherwise her tone is level and a casual eavesdropper might think she was serious.

"Everything I have ever felt about you, Davinia, is inappropriate. But anyway... you know what I mean."

"You... know why I've not been going?"

"I can guess... I've not... seen him there. He's still bothering you?"

She shakes her head, but I don't know if this is to deny it, or a signal that she still does not want to talk about it.

"Anyway," she says. "I'm thinking of abandoning Marsden C. of E. completely. So you'll have to get used to managing without me altogether."

"Abandoning the church? Is that wise? You'll be as good as an atheist in the eyes of those who matter here." Then it comes to me and I feel a dreadful sinking of my spirits. "Ah... you mean you're leaving altogether. Leaving the school?"

She blushes. "I've been offered a position at County. An advisory role."

"Advisory?"

"Yes... and in case you're wondering it's nothing to do with... you know... *him*. No one smoothed my way with this."

"I wasn't wondering."

"All the same, I *wanted* you to know."

"So... you'll be going around putting the fear of God into places like this then?"

"You think it'll suit me?"

"Yes I do. You'll be good at it."

"Putting the fear of God in to people? I suppose so." She frowns. "Not much of an epitaph though is it?"

"Well, if it's any consolation, you don't frighten everyone."

"Not you, you mean? I'm obviously not trying hard enough these days."

"It's true, you do seem to have gone a little soft on me."

She twinkles. "Yes, I have. Richard... I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"For not being what you wanted me to be."

"Oh... that. It wasn't your fault. I was... menopausal... or something. I'm sorry I made such a fuss about it."

"You sound dismissive... like you want to put it behind you."

It's true – I do want to put it behind me, but a part of me wishes it did not have to be this way.

"If it's any consolation," she says, "I think... well, that you're a decent man."

"You do? Well, that's something, I suppose." And I'm suddenly thinking, what's brought this on? Davinia, are you all right?

She takes a breath and then asks me: "What will you do?"

"Do?"

"It worries me... that without someone keeping an eye on you, you'll do something... silly." She frowns again. "I also have this feeling in my bones that you might already have done it."

"Done what?"

"Something silly."

"No..."

"Why did you marry her? This... girl..."

"We're not married. You know we're not. And she's not a girl."

"All right but..." She looks at me as if she's expecting more, expecting me to tell her – I don't know what – to let her *inside* of me, and I *am* tempted, but my insides are so soft, and that's really not a place for someone as indigestible as Davinia.

"Richard?"

"Hmm?"

"You worry me."

"I know... you said."

"But it worries me more that you worry me at all. There's something in you I admire, really, something heroic, in a funny kind of way, but you also have a self-destructive streak, like you're hell bent on smashing yourself on the rocks, when you could just as

easily sail around them...

"All Romantics end this way. And you *are* a Romantic. But they live short lives, and end up burning themselves out in a haze of opium, and leaving behind them as much scandal as is humanly possible..."

"Anyway," she goes on, embarrassed now. "This is all by the by. There was something else I came to tell you."

"Something *else*?" But she's already told me so much. Indeed I don't think we've ever spoken so much as this before.

She smiles politely, but lowers her eyes – she's reeling us in, winding us down to more mundane matters. "I've arranged cover for your class tomorrow."

"You have?"

"There's a seminar on the role of the Church School in Secular Society – I sent you an e-mail about it?"

"Yes... I remember. I ignored it. It sounded so *fascinating*. Em... is that tomorrow?"

"Yes. But don't worry. I've already put your name down. I'll meet you outside the conference hall at nine."

"Meet me?"

"I'm coming too."

"And it was... where?"

"Southport, Richard... remember? At the conference hall? On the Marine drive? Really, you must pay more attention, you know?"

The corner of her mouth gives a twitch. She's enjoying this – not quite serious, but not exactly teasing either. A day out with Davinia will always be entertaining, and God knows I need the change, except every second of the day I'll be knotted up, thinking about Lillian, waiting in Durleston for my return, a blade in her hand.

I could say no, tell her I've got personal problems, but I can't, because I'm a coward and I suddenly have a hankering for the cold light of day.

Chapter 37

Southport at nine, on a warm summer's morning. There's a wide, soft sky, the cry of gulls, and an early, un-aired quietness to the Marine Drive. I'm conscious I'm not far from Davinia's flat here. I can probably see it from the conference centre. I wonder if she's renting it out. I'm hoping she's not because it's hard to think of anyone else but her living in it.

She's waiting outside the glass doors to the entrance of the conference centre, her trim figure reflected in them – dark blue suit, short skirt, long blonde hair, brushed out and hanging down her back. She's been growing it longer I notice – not a good idea when you have a school as over-run with head-lice as we have. She's got her iPhone pressed to her ear, and she's making rolling, emphatic gestures with her free hand as she explains to someone on the other end what it is she expects from them.

I'm early, but she makes me feel late. I also wonder what I'm doing there now. These things are invariably a waste of time and certainly not worth the expense of a supply teacher to cover my class – though I'm not unhappy to be free of the little bastards for one day.

"Good morning, Richard. Shall we go in?"

I pull open the door, and stand aside for her to enter, a stupid gesture from an era long gone when men held open doors for women, I mean without fear of ridicule. She looks at me pointedly, wondering perhaps if I'm being ironic, and steps inside. No, I think she likes it. I can see how she might. I find I like it too.

We register at the desk, and are given our plastic badges. I pin mine dutifully to my lapel, while Davinia clips hers to the strap of her handbag, so as not to spoil the look of her suit. I take my place beside her in the theatre. She sits upright, consulting her 'phone for any last messages, legs crossed, her elevated foot swinging up and down, teasing me with the little gap between her toes. Her heels look sharp and metallic, her lips a red gash, her wolverine eyes glittering crisply. A slight sideways smile and a flick of her eyebrow tells me she knows what she's doing and is enjoying the effect she's having on me. She's what? Flirting? Am I to be mortified, embarrassed, uncomfortable? Or do I enjoy it?

"You're a naughty girl, Miss Barkwell."

She pouts in approval.

I wear a pale grey suit. I wonder if she notices it's fitted. I also wear a Saville Row shirt, polished Oxfords, and a silk tie. And as ever it seems that when I am with her, the disguise creeps inside of me, and I feel better than I really am. I am further from myself, embracing this mask, this persona of self importance. And is that really so bad? Is it not better to take comfort in life, and light, and in the fantasy of reality, than in sleep and darkness, and in the dogged rejection of everything tangible? It is as if Durleston has robbed me of the will to live by making the prospect of death seem... what? Like going to sleep, like going home, like tuning out of the madness... like resting my weary bones?

The lights go down and the first of the Powerpoint slides goes up. The first word of the first slide is "Synergy" and I know we're in for a long day. It's a dreadful word, a hold-your-head-in-your-hands and weep kind of word. For a moment I'm back in America, back in a corporate presentation with some suited kid blathering on about stuff he seems to understand, and it worries me because I feel I must have dropped off at some point and missed the vital piece of information that would render his jabberings coherent.

There's a break for coffee at 11:00. I depart in search of the serving table, while Davinia scans the crowd and begins to network. I return with her coffee, just as she is striking up a conversation with a grey haired, pony-tailed man. He is impressively casual in jeans and a floral print shirt. Davinia introduces me to him and we shake hands. She takes a sip of her coffee just as the pony-tailed man is asking me if I am enjoying the conference. He is being polite. I do not know him, and have no reason to pick a fight with him, but find myself asking if he thinks there's any chance that God will be mentioned before lunch-time.

Davinia splutters and coughs, then laughs. The pony-tailed gent demurs and Davinia tells him he mustn't mind me, that I take everything far too seriously. Then she steers me away, and I think I'm to be scolded but she can hardly keep her face straight.

I'm puzzled. "Don't tell me – he was the chief R.E. Advisor for the whole of the country?"

"I've no idea who he was, Richard."

"I'm sorry... I didn't mean to be so..."

"What? Honest?... but we must always be honest, mustn't we? Even if it makes us unpopular. Otherwise how are people to know

what it is we stand for?"

"Honest? Like you are you mean?"

"Do I detect a sarcastic tone? But surely with me what you see is what you get?"

"And you call *me* sarcastic?"

"I think the proper term for my tone would be ironic; really, you industry types: your grasp of English is often so second rate."

She's twinkling, fencing with me. I enjoy this for a while, but it would be ungentlemanly to press for an advantage and she appreciates it that I do not try.

"Really though, Davinia, I am sorry. I promise to behave myself from now on."

"You mustn't," she says. Then she reaches up rather intimately, unclips the badge from my lapel and slides it into my pocket. Then she smooths down the pucker on my lapel with her fingertip. Ordinarily this would worry me, in case people were watching, because surely only lovers would use such body language, but I find I couldn't care less. There will come a time when I will no longer see this woman, and I mean to enjoy every subtle nuance of the time that remains to us.

"Come on," she says, "I'll let you buy me an ice-cream."

"I don't think they're serving any..."

"Not here. On the pier or somewhere."

"But I think we're starting again in five minutes."

"Well you can stay if you like, but I'm bunking off. We've been here long enough. And since God is not to be spoken of, as you had the audacity to point out, I don't see why we should remain to be insulted by words like leverage."

"They've mentioned leverage? I missed that."

"Several times – leveraging this, leveraging that. Weren't you paying attention?"

"My mind must have wandered off. That word annoys you too? But it's the sort of thing I can hear you saying."

She gives me a narrow smile. "I'll forgive you for that, but now you owe me lunch as well. So, are you coming or not?"

Outside, the air is fresh, salty, warm. I can smell chips. People are strolling in their shorts and teeshirts – girls are in bikini-tops, children skip along with ice-creams, and the sky is dotted with dancing kites. It's not twenty miles from Durleston but it's a different world – not so glutinous... the relief is tangible. I wish I

could find an easy way of bringing Lillian into this world, but even such a simple act as this – walking down the pier, seems impossibly far away for us.

Davinia advises me to remove my tie, saying it makes me look less like an escapee from the conference. I don't know if she's joking or not.

"Davinia... this feels a bit..."

"What?"

"A bit... naughty."

"I know. Delicious isn't it? I'm surprised you care – a rebel like you."

I order a couple of cokes and ice-creams from the cafe-bar at the end of the pier, and we sit together, looking out over the vast plane of the beach, the Irish sea an imaginary line quivering through the haze, a mile out. She's wearing sunglasses now, her jacket draped over her chair-back. I don't know how she looks at me because I cannot see her eyes, and understanding Davinia swings on being able to see her eyes.

There's so much space here, the wide open sands – figures like little dots, far out on the shore, and then there's the sky... this big dome of sky. You can see your thoughts coming at you from a long way off here – not like in Durleston where they crowd in on you, all of them whispering in your ear at the same time.

"Richard?"

"Hmm?"

"It's like you're away with the fairies sometimes."

"I'm sorry, Dee."

"Wait!... Did you just call me Dee?"

"Em... I think I did. I've no idea where that one came from. I'm sorry for that too. It was a little... over-familiar, I suppose."

"Yes... yes it was... not that I mind of course."

"You don't?"

"No, I think I like it actually. Dee! Yes, I think I suit it." She laughs. "You know, I like a man who's capable of deep reflection, mainly I suppose because I'm totally incapable of it myself. But really, sometimes you have the look of someone drowning in their own thoughts."

"I can be a little self absorbed, I know."

"Neither of us is right though – I mean, the way we deal with the world."

"No?"

"What's our purpose, Richard? What does all your self-reflecting tell you?"

"It doesn't tell me anything."

"But where do we belong, do you think?" She gestures to the summer holiday crowds milling around, taking the air, admiring the limitless view of the beach."Out here?" Then she taps the side of her head. "Or in here?"

Am I really discussing the nature of existence with Davinia Barkwell? I take a breath. "Evidence would suggest out here," I tell her. "If only because we spend such a lot of time in it, and it causes us all such a lot of pain and confusion. The other thing, the 'in here' thing... I'm guessing that's so we can reflect upon our lives and ask ourselves if we're doing the right thing, living the way we do. We need both ways of looking at the world. The simple answer to your question then is we belong in both, at the same time, if we can manage it."

She looks anxious for a moment, a run of troubled thoughts flitting across the front of her mind. "There we are then," she says. "I... need to reach in and pull your head above the surface of your thoughts, or you'll drown. And you need to reach over and pull me in, teach me to swim a little."

"Swim?"

"Yes... or I'll go mad. You think there's no feeling behind this mask?"

"On the contrary, I know there is."

"Well then... there we are. The only thing stopping either of us is the question of whether or not we trust each other. I trust you, Richard. I trust you with my life."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. But you... you don't trust anyone, least of all me."

"I do... I do trust you..."

"Why should you? You've only to dent my pride a little and I set you up to make an ass of yourself."

I laugh at the memory. "Yes, you did do that – no hard feelings though. It was different then... I deserved it... and really, I do trust you."

She reaches over places her hand momentarily on my sleeve and says: "Then tell me what's going on."

I find myself taking a breath, then staring into my coke for a

while. And then: "We mentioned yesterday about doing something hasty..."

She leans forward so as to hear me better, hear my confession. "The word I used was *silly*," she says.

"Silly then."

"Go on."

"I'm... about to do *something*. But it's not silly, not hasty, though it may appear to be, to someone who doesn't understand my motives. I want you to know that. I don't want you to think I've gone off the deep end or something. I've been thinking about it for a long time now. It's probably going to cause a bit of a stir, and I *will* have to leave the school, probably go abroad for a bit..."

"You said you weren't in any trouble."

"I know... it's... complicated,..."

"It's something to do with her, isn't it? Of course it is. I'm sorry, I don't even know her name."

"Neither do I."

"What?"

"I call her Lillian... but it's not her real name."

She thinks for a moment, then sighs, settles back in her chair and raises her sunglasses. Her eyes are calm, questioning, open... she is giving this moment to me. "Richard... is there something you want to tell me, about Lillian?"

"Yes, Dee, I think there is."

I tell her everything – at least everything I think I know. Davinia's face is immobile now. Her lips could be firmly set against me or set firmly in concentration while she listens. And I don't know why I'm telling her any of this because there's not a damned thing she can do – it's just that she's the one person on earth I have chosen... the one person I will leave behind who I want to understand the truth of what it is I am about to do.

When I'm done she thinks for a while, tapping her spoon against her glass. Then she reminds me about lunch – that I've really no choice to go with her because she's already booked the table, and because, she says, I know I want to, but we should go back to her apartment first, so she can change her clothes.

All of this is a distraction of course. She was not expecting my confession. It's unsettled her, and she feels the need to cover it up while she thinks about it. As we walk slowly back to the Marine Drive, the boards of the pier ringing to the sound of her heels, she

turns to me and slips her hand through my arm.

"My God, Richard," she says. "I've always thought there were hidden depths to you, but this is more than I expected."

I'm embarrassed I told her now, and afraid of her thoughts, afraid of her judgement, which I expect to be as cold as it is sensible. I don't want her to be too hasty with it. I want to deflect her away from expressing any opinions. Then she scratches her head and I decide this might be a good time to tell her about the lice.

The look in her eye is revealing. She steps aside, glares at me, her nostrils flared. Then she blushes and smiles in self deprecation. There *is* a vulnerability there. The hard, polished shell of Davinia is not protecting something worthless.

"Tell a soul and I'll cut your balls off," she says.

"Yes, Miss Barkwell. I would have mentioned it before, but,... these things are personal aren't they, and I thought you wouldn't appreciate me knowing. I thought you might find out yourself."

"You were trying to preserve my... what... my dignity?"

"I suppose I was... yes."

"Richard, what's the matter with you? I'm a cold hearted, stuck up, power hungry bitch. Anyone else would have taken pleasure in rubbing my nose in it."

"Em... well, I just like it that you have dignity... there's so little of it about these days. It's something worth preserving, I think."

She joins with me again, slips her arm in mine and we fall in step once more.

"I take it you're not renting the flat out then?" I ask.

"No. I couldn't bear to think of anyone else living there. I'm selling the house instead, moving in here permanently." She gives my arm a tug. "We'd better find a chemist," she says. "If I give you the money, will you go in and buy it for me?"

"What?"

"The herbicidal shampoo. I'd be too embarrassed."

"Oh... sure."

"And Richard?"

"Hm?"

"I really do like it when you call me Dee."

She's laughing now, her hair towelled up, as she sits by the window in her apartment. She's wearing the satin print robe, her legs are long and tanned and lovely. She's shed her armour and it's

in unguarded moments like these she seems quite girlish. I suspect she might even be capable of skittishness. As she rubs her hair dry she looks me in the eye and says:

"What you're doing... with Lillian... it's the right thing."

"Then why does it feel more like I'm betraying a trust."

"Well... you *are*. But you're also trying to save her life."

"A trust is sacred though, and I'm wondering if she'll forgive me for it? I mean, would you?"

"Of course not, but I'd get over it."

"I guess."

"But I also think... and forgive me for saying this... you're fooling yourself if you believe you're her last hope. It's very noble of you, very romantic, but also, I wonder if you're seeing the full picture."

"Oh?"

"A woman like that – you're no more in love with the real her than you thought you were with the real me. You don't actually *know* her, do you? You don't even know her real name. So, how does it work? You betray her to the immigration people, then go with her, to her country? Then what? Marry her, and bring her home with you?"

"That's a rough outline of the plan, yes."

"You'd really do all of that for a woman you basically don't know?"

"But I *do* know her. I've known her for a year. Sometimes it feels like longer, like all of my life. It's not a person's name that's important, not an addresses or a credit card number. It's what they are inside, how they *connect* with you, and what they come to mean to *you*. You know this. I know you know this."

"All right. But, you'll forgive the realist in me telling you, you're going to wake up one morning to find she's not there any more. You know *this*. I know you know *this*."

"All right. Maybe. But it doesn't matter. I just want to put her back on the right side of the law, the right side of life."

"And... be with her?"

"For as long as she's happy to be with me, yes."

She blinks, a moment of inward reflection. I feel it too, but I don't know what it means.

She wears a tissue thin blouse to the restaurant, vanilla coloured, and almost transparent, over a dark blue strappy bodice. Her skirt is short and floaty, and summer-holidayish. She feels

cooler she tells me, fresher. She is impossibly good looking. We eat salad in the high ceilinged dining room of the Duke of York hotel. I'm subdued and thinking about what she said.

To betray Lillian in order to save her life is the noble thing; there's a kind of honour in it, but Davinia's right: I do not trust that having given up everything, I will not wake one day to find her gone. But if we cannot turn a blind eye to this, if we cannot give all for love, or at least the idea of love, then I'm right back in that school hall betraying Lillian all over again.

"You were wrong you know?" she says.

"About what?"

"When you asked me that time, what came afterwards, and you told me there would be nothing."

"After what?"

"Don't be evasive. You know what I mean. If you and I had... well... you know? On Christmas Eve, like I wanted us to. You said: what then? You were impressively cool and calm and analytical, like a bucket of cold water. You implied there'd be nothing to follow, nothing worthwhile at least. I'm just saying, perhaps it's fortunate you never came. It may have made things even more complicated for you than they are now."

"I doubt that."

"You think so? You're wrong. It would not have been just the once, Richard."

I hide my unease behind a smile. "Now she tells me!"

"You were afraid," she says.

"Well, of course I was."

"Not in the way you're thinking."

"Oh?"

"You were afraid to think I could ever be interested in a man like you – not as you wanted me to be, but as I really am. It wasn't anything to do with your being afraid of how brief a fling it might have been... or that it would have been an insult to the nobility of your feelings and all that other romantic twaddle: you were afraid of the opposite! You were afraid it might change you, take you out of that dark place you've been hiding in all these years, drag you into the light. You were afraid I might show you what love really is. Physical, bright, tingly... exciting... Lillian is lulling you to sleep, Richard. With me, I assure you, you would never have slept a wink."

I'm blushing and she grins into her wineglass, very pleased at the effect she's having. But there's no point in this, and she doesn't know what she's saying because the wine has made her a little tipsy, so I try to distract her by calling the waiter over and asking for the bill. I'm thinking it will change the subject, set us arguing over who will pay, but it doesn't work out so grandly as that. Instead the waiter waits with a supercilious expression while I delve ever more deeply into my wallet for my credit card. But it's not there.

Davinia spares my embarrassment and gives the pompous ass her own card, then offers me her 'phone so I can cancel mine. But I don't know who to ring, and I tell her not to worry – that I've probably left it in my other jacket.

We're walking back to the Marine Drive now, in the direction of her apartment, and my car.

"Sorry, Davinia - that didn't go as well as I thought."

"Coffee then?"

"Em..."

"Cinema? Show?..."

"No... better not."

"But it's ages since I went to the pictures and I hate to go alone."

"Davinia!..."

"I know... I'm being naughty again. It's home-time then, Mr Hunter. You're dismissed. I'll walk you to your car. When will you do it, do you think?"

"Do it?"

"Betray her?"

"Ah..."

There's something brutal in her tone. She means to intimidate me perhaps, test me, see if I really mean to do it. But already I'm losing heart. She's doing it again, making me feel ashamed, wanting me to be weak.

"Tomorrow, I think."

We part by the Marine Lake. Red-sailed dinghies are slanting across the breeze, carving out foamy wakes upon the cobalt-blue waters. Something makes me take her hands and press them. She doesn't mind, though she doesn't understand what she reads in me.

"Richard?"

"It's just... I have a feeling I'll never see you again."

"Don't be silly, you'll see me tomorrow."

"No... I mean like this. As you are now. Tomorrow you'll be... well... that stern headmistress again, and soon you'll be moving on... and God knows where I'll end up. I just feel it's goodbye, that's all. Goodbye to whatever it was we failed to make the acquaintance of."

"You think this is the end?"

The sun is moving over into early evening. It feels like an end. "Yes," I tell her. "No sense in denying it."

"And?"

"And it makes me feel... sad, I think."

She plants her palm squarely in my chest, as if to push me away, but holds it there for a moment, over my heart. "Go home Richard. There *will* be a tomorrow. And I *will* see you in it."

I drive slowly, conscious of the sun swinging over behind me, acutely aware it will be a beautiful evening on the coast, and that I'm missing something in not bearing witness to it. I'm also thinking of my credit card, but I'm not worried about that, because I know who has it. I'm relieved – not that I haven't lost it, because I really do not care. I'm relieved because I'm a coward and I hated the thought of betraying Lillian. Better by far, I waited... until she betrayed me.

Chapter 38

William is waiting outside the house, like a harbinger of bad news. He is not a happy man as he explains, but I've already had a premonition of it, so it feels like old news to me. Lillian showed up at the farm that morning he tells me, begged a ride into Middleton, to the railway station, told him we'd had a row. She was smartly dressed - suit and a long rain-coat - carrying a rucksack, looking like she was going away for a while. He's sorry, he tells me, though he has a look in his eye that also says he thinks I'm better off out of it. I ignore this, of course, because he doesn't understand. And what I'm thinking to myself is that she's had all day, that she could be anywhere, that she planned this a long time ago. You're thinking all of this was merely to gain my trust, and access to my credit card – but that's the narrow view. You cannot gain someone's trust and not be touched by them, unless you're a heartless grifter.

And that's not Lillian.

There'll be a few thousand pounds gone on the credit card, and a train ticket to a city far away. The card will show up in the mail, in a week or so. And if you must know, I'd always known she'd take it, from the day first she asked me if I trusted her with my PIN number. My credit card will protect her better than I ever could myself. She can clean me out if she wants, and it would still be a small price to pay in exchange for what she has given back to me. There had seemed to be so few options open to us. My betrayal of her was one of course, but this was another. I'd merely closed my eyes to the possibility of it.

William slopes off, feeling bad, feeling tortured, but none of this is his fault. I'll make it up to him with a bottle of whiskey or something later, but for now I go inside. I'm thinking there might be a note, but there's no trace of her, and the house rings empty, so I walk into the belly of the wood, half of me daring to hope she'll be waiting in the bivouac, but there's no trace of her. I boil up a kettle of water, thinking to infuse some herbs, like in the old days, that in the meantime she'll come walking out of the forest as bold as you please, and sit down beside me.

But she's gone, and Durleston feels empty without her. It also feels old and worn and ugly, because the Romantic in me can no longer *feel* it. There's a supermarket carrier bag caught high up in

the branches of a pine tree. I hear it flapping and slapping in the breeze, like the banner of an invading army. It's impossible to ignore the fact Durleston was a lost cause before ever I came back to it. So, now it falls into the possession of a less sensitive imagination, under whose careless stewardship it will die, and I must let it go, I must turn my eyes and my heart elsewhere, from the past back into some kind of future.

I think about her. And I think about her. And I think about her. I remember her once telling me she would never take advantage of my generosity. I had not understood it then. She'd been standing before me, free, unblemished, unchained, reborn... and slowly she had re-modelled herself, re-clothed herself, from the shoddy, shabby filth she'd worn before into something new. She had become herself. I'm tempted of course to think that all she wanted from me was easy access to my bank account – I know you're thinking the same thing, but you'd be wrong. It would be to ignore everything we had ever shared, everything she had ever given back to me, and you can't fake that. She would take what she had to, but not a penny more

Suddenly I find myself letting out a mighty roar. I can't help it. It's not me, but I put all my breath into it, all my strength. Birds fly and the whole of Durleston seems to stir in sympathy, and I finish with my head between my knees, feeling something inside of me, something that was not there before, something elevated and good, and true,.. but I'm not sure I want it any more.

I return to the house and sit out by the Rye, wondering how I can ever live in the place without her. Durleston grows quieter as dusk approaches. Ghosts appear and brush their hands against my cheek in sympathy. They seem to like the garden. I'm glad. They'll be good company for whoever comes to live here, when I'm gone. Meanwhile I have reports to write up, and so distract myself by tapping at my laptop on the little table outdoors, listening to the gentle rippling of the peaty waters, remembering the times I have lain in Lillian's arms these past nights, starved of sleep, but also alive to the moment, in a way I have never known. But I can't concentrate for long. I'm trying to understand this feeling inside of me, trying to understand what it is I feel. And all I can say is that I feel... strong.

Then I turn, half aware of something, and there's a figure standing by the house, transparent in the growing shades of

evening, but gaining substance by degrees as I focus in. He seems unsure... lost perhaps. I do not know him and I'm puzzled by what is yet another queer turn, wondering if it's another ghost looking to pass on it condolences – but I'm really not in the mood now. Only Lillian will do this evening, and I am fighting back the tears that I will never see her again, but at the same time thanking God she was stronger than me.

There's a ruggedness about him, this man: tanned, muscular, blonde, square jawed. He has a fresh scar running up over his temple. Has he come to murder me then? Is he a hired man? It'll make no difference if I tell him Lillian's gone.

Bollocks to it then.

I wonder, seriously, if the bastard wants a cup of tea first? He'd better have a gun with him if he wants to finish this quickly, because my head is in a very dark place of a sudden, and I'm spoiling for a fight. So come on, you bastard, let's get on with it.

"Dad?"'

What?

My heart flutters. "Ches?"

He doesn't recognise me either. He takes a step towards me, hesitant... afraid. "I... heard about Gramps," he says.

"Gramps?"

"I'm sorry I wasn't at the funeral."

But my son didn't know him, I'm thinking. He'd only met my father once. But he tells me they'd been writing to each other – he writing for news of England... for news of me. It's really Ches, my son!

"It's what you do," he explains "between times, between patrols, I mean. You rest, you eat, you write letters."

How did he find me?

"Asked around," he says. "Got a puncture up on the trail. Had to walk the last half mile."

I laugh, his American accent reminding me of the greater part of my life, a part I've left behind, run away from. But I find I can face it now, as I am – whoever I am.

"How's Mom?" I ask him.

"Good," he says. "Her and this guy... well... looks like it's pretty serious. She's maybe thinking it would be good to settle things, you know, between you and her."

"Divorce you mean?"

He looks crestfallen. Confused. He's seen so much, been through so much. Yet this simple meeting takes every ounce of his courage.

"Been shot?" I ask him.

He nods, wipes his fingers over the livid scar on his temple. "Ain't too bad. Other's had it worse."

What to say? "Tell Mom, to get in touch. I'll give you my e-mail. It's cool... really. Whatever she wants is fine by me. What about Sis? You heard anything?"

"In rehab... 's all I know."

"Think she'll make it this time?"

He shrugs. I offer him a seat, and he flops down in it, weary. "Cool place you got here."

"Oh... I think we've both seen better days."

"Kind of remote."

"Like me then."

"Got that right." His awkwardness is slipping away now, his shoulders relax. The last time I saw him he was a child, stupidly proud in his uniform, giving me the finger. I cannot believe the transformation in him. I cannot believe the transformation in myself, when I look at him.

"So,.. what you doing these days, Dad?"

"Oh... teaching."

"Yea? Cool. Would never have figured you for that!"

I know. Me neither. Strange, eh?"

"Still... lookin' like you got it together, here."

"Ha, you think? What else did they tell you, up in the village?"

He blushes. "Well... that you were with someone. Is it true?"

"I was, for a while, yes. Not... not any more, it seems. You?"

He shrugs. "Nothing serious at least."

"Ches,..."

"Look, Dad... only got a couple of days left now – took me a while to track you down, see? But... I'd like to... write you, you know? Is that okay? Out there... letters... home... folks... being connected... it's real important to a guy, that's all. I wanna be connected – not just with Mom, but with you too."

"Connected? Yes. I understand. Of course."

"I know things ain't been that good between us. Sure, I've been an ass-hole, but..."

"You *weren't* an ass-hole, Ches. You were a kid, a brave kid, and I'm proud of you."

He gives a sigh. I cannot remember the last words we spoke. It seems so long ago now, but were they really so bad as his expression suggests? Did I just tell him I was proud of him? What difference does that make in the scheme of things, and on the scale of things he's seen and done? Seeing him now, I find I cannot empty myself of that sense of loss at Lillian's going, but there's equally something very strange in this – that my son has come back, crossed the void, extracted himself from the depths of a hell on earth, seeking to reconnect me with the world, while Lillian sinks into memory, and imagination, like a sprite or a daemon that never existed at all.

"Of course I'll write, Ches. But... you'll stay with me for a bit eh?"

"Sure. Ain't got nowhere else."

"You're welcome. It's a weird old place though."

"Looks it."

"Come on, we'd best go and see about that puncture."

"Okay."

"So... is that all they said, up in the village? That I was *with* someone?"

He laughs. "Nope, that's not all they said." And later, as we climb the track to his car: "You okay, Dad?"

"I'm fine... just pleased to see you, that's all..."

Chapter 39

Davinia takes the flowers with a tight little smile. As the former headmistress of a primary school, she has lately discovered an odd aversion to being the focus of attention. The school hall reverberates with applause. The old curmudgeon who has just presented her with the bouquet thinks for a moment, wondering whether he should dare risk a peck on the cheek, decides wisely against it and steps back into the ranks.

I'm at the front of the hall, by the stage – unusual for me, I know. I'm more often to be found skulking by the exit. I applaud loudly, and sincerely. Indeed, I think I am the only one genuinely sorry she is going.

It's the last day of term, the summer holidays are upon us, a six week hiatus. I'll be going into Middleton tomorrow, to the travel agent and booking myself on the first plane out of Manchester. Two weeks in the sun should do it – beyond that I'm not fussy where it is I go. It's a plan of sorts, and we'll take things from there.

Davinia is looking like she's had enough and just wants the ceremony to be over. She has only the poem to endure now, some corny stanzas on leaving, both written and read by Mandy Becket, with – it has to be said – quite touching sincerity and only a little help from yours truly. It's during the reading Davinia catches my eye and holds on to it as if it were a lifeline, something to get her through. I smile, and her stiff little smile relaxes, becomes wider, and looser, so that I can see the pearl whites of her teeth. Seeing her smile like that deepens my sense of wellness, and there swells between us a feeling of secret knowing warmth.

Yes... I know. *Déjà vu!*

Half an hour later, the school is empty, her desk is cleared and she's round the back, dumping the inconvenient bouquet in the bin, wiping her hands of the sentiment. She gives a satisfying little start, when she realises I'm watching her.

"There's gratitude for you," I tell her.

"Richard!" She straightens her skirt, smooths the sleeves of her jacket, recovers her poise. "The card said: *with sincere blessings and love*. Yuk! I mean, I ask you!"

"I know, I wrote it."

"Oh, did you?"

"No. I think it was Crabby who wrote it."

"I know they're all glad to see the back of me."

"Not all."

"No... well... Look, Richard, I heard... about your son..."

"Yes... we've spent a little time together."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Yes. A bit of a turn up. He's back with his unit now, God knows where. He can't always tell me. But we're keeping in touch."

"I'm glad. You must worry though."

"It's the price of being connected, I suppose. Look, I even have a mobile 'phone now." I show her the phone and she pretends to be impressed, but I can tell there's more on her mind.

"Anyway, how did you get to hear about my son? I thought no one spoke to you?"

"It was Grizelda," she explains. "We're best of friends now, since I puked all over the church wall. But don't worry, it's only because she's after more on this rumour your *internet bride* has run off with all your money."

"Is that what they're saying? It would explain some of the looks I've been getting – somewhere between pity and serves you right." I realise of course, Davinia is also wondering. "Lillian took a couple of thousand, and posted the card back. I've no idea where she is. But you were right, I was foolish to think I was her last chance. She knew what she was doing all along."

"I didn't say you were foolish. But anyway... no hard feelings, then?"

"No, I wish her well. I miss her... but she was right, I could never have protected her. I was going to explain all of this to you, really. It's just..."

"I know... I've been that stern headmistress again, freezing everybody out. And dreading today, if I'm honest. So, you didn't have to betray her in the end. She had another plan all along." She smiles. "Did I tell you I told you so?"

"I think you just did, yes. I don't expect others to understand. But just knowing her for a while... it saved me."

"That's something then... isn't it? She sighs, twiddles with her hair... "Richard... I wasn't just going to drive away, you know? I mean... without coming to see you."

"You weren't?"

"I wanted to say... not goodbye. That's not it. I was going to

say... you mustn't worry, you know, about Lillian, because it sounds like she can take care of herself. But mostly, I wanted to say, actually... I'm *glad* you're no longer with her."

"Dee?"

"Because... look, all I know, all I... *feel*... is that I don't want to lose you, I mean lose *touch* with you... or lose hope of ever... touching you. That's all. In fact, I was wondering... hoping I mean... if you'd like to pack a bag and drive over to my apartment for the weekend."

"But... Dee... I can't."

Are her eyes red? Is that a hint of a tear? Is she welling up?

"Oh? " She tells me at once, and dismissively, that she understands, but she doesn't, and I'm only making things worse by not explaining myself properly. How much did that admission just cost her?

"What I mean is, I can't *drive* over. I sold the car, you see? I didn't really need it, and I only bought the damned thing in the first place to impress you."

Yes, tears. They're spilling, and she's wiping them away, smudging her mascara, but also laughing. "Richard that's pathetic."

"I know."

"Well, I only ever took you to the Duke of York Hotel to impress you."

"You did?"

"I'm more of a cosy restaurant, and soft lights sort of person, actually."

"No way."

"I was... just hoping there might be something left," she says. "I mean, of that man who once bought a car to impress a woman, and who wanted once to... put his finger between her toes."

"Oh... that." I'm blushing. "Well... what about that woman who doesn't wait for men to take the initiative?"

"I still don't."

"There's always the train."

"What?"

"I'll get the train."

"You'll come? Really?"

"I'll come this evening."

She brightens, senses her own brightening, then covers it, but not before I've seen how much the moment means to her. And that

it means anything, means everything to me. She seals things with a chaste little peck on the cheek, which seems almost comical in its restraint, but then she leans into me and I feel the longing in her. Then she pulls a Biro from her bag and writes her number on the back of my hand.

"I'll be waiting," she says.

When she's gone, I look around at the old buildings, and feel them releasing me. Oh, it may be that I'll go on working here, because as I have grown stronger, I have grown to enjoy it more, but the place won't haunt me now, it will no longer hold my future captive.

My thoughts are still with her as I'm packing my bag, and later still when I'm walking up that track, out of Durleston's eternal twilight to the station at Middleton. I imagine her, softly sweatered now, gazing out of the window of her apartment as the sun sets. It promises a night that I admit has me light headed with expectation, but mostly I anticipate a dawn that brings freshness, and a new road. And as I walk, I take out the phone, dial her number, feel the blessing in the sound of her voice when she answers, and I tell her...

I'm on my way.

* * * * * *

END